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NEW WRITINGS IN SF 26

is now one of the most well-established and respected series in the science fiction world. Created in 1964 by John Carnell, in collaboration with Corgi Books, NEW WRITINGS rapidly gained a reputation as a showcase for the most talented writers in the field; and when John Carnell died in 1972 the series was taken over by Kenneth Bulmer whose wide-ranging knowledge of, and enthusiasm for SF has continued to make NEW WRITINGS the place to find stories of a speculative, forward-looking, and mind-provoking nature, highlighting and illustrating the dilemmas of today – and tomorrow.

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Edited by Kenneth Bulmer

New Writings in SF 26

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FOREWORD

by

KENNETH BULMER

EXACTLY ten years ago, in May, 1964, the first volume of *New Writings in SF* was compiled, and after a decade of highly successful sf publishing the series continues with unabated vigour and enthusiasm to present the best of current new writing.

The very first foreword indicated quite clearly the reasons behind the appearance of original short sf in hard cover and paperback form. '*New Writings in SF* is a radical departure in the field of the science fiction short story. For nearly forty years the science fiction short story has been the main platform from which this fascinating literary medium developed. Without the specialized magazines in which these short stories originally appeared, there would be little or no background to science fiction today and it would probably languish in the 'speculative romance' of the H. G. Wells era. In recent years, however, the specialized magazines have only had a limited appeal, primarily to a male audience either technically trained or technically minded. It was left to the expanding hardcover publishing field and the mass market of the paperback to introduce this exciting medium to a vaster general public already conscious that Man was on the threshold of space travel. In this respect, its many editors were forced to select material from the best stories *already* published and familiar to the *aficionados*.

'Now the time has come to take this development one natural stage further – and introduce *new* material specially written and selected for the *new* market.'

Six years after the launching of *New Writings in SF* a

selection was compiled from volumes 1 to 4 and issued separately as a re-introduction to the idea. To quote again: 'When the first volumes of *New Writings in SF* were first published in 1964 and 1965, none of us concerned with the production and publication of those editions could visualize the enormous success the series was to have, although we were all confident that the idea of presenting new science fiction stories in paperback format was one the general reading public as well as the *aficionado* would more than welcome.'

This has certainly been proved true, and of the twenty-six volumes so far published, twenty-one were compiled by the first editor, John Carnell, from whose introductions the above quotations are taken.

Because sf is the literature of change and is able to convey the necessary overview of life on this planet – where change is now fast enough for even the most blinkered of reactionaries to be unable to ignore what is going on about them – its value and indeed its vital necessity is no longer open to question. This sf overview derives not necessarily from the details of every individual story, but rather from the ambience of the whole corpus of sf, even the most fantastic-seeming of stories contributing its quota of understanding to the change going on in the universe and in ourselves.

There have been wide and dramatic changes over the whole area of sf in this past decade, many of them pre-figured by John Carnell himself in his earlier sf magazine *New Worlds*. *New Writings* will continue to reflect these changes as well as maintaining its presentation of the best new writing from established and new authors. This volume, No. 26, in presenting nine brand new stories, is an excellent example of this process in action.

John Keith is a Canadian, although born in London, England, who is making an entrance into the US sf scene with novels and short stories, besides having sf serial plays broadcast over CBC, Winnipeg. He is therefore not a brand new science fiction writer, although 'A Planet Called Cervantes' is his first appearance in these pages, and his story

should please all those who like their human and alien interactions to take place against a galactic background. John Keith has himself some experience of life in remote and exotic backgrounds, having been engaged on building radar lines in the Far North and operating out of a small airport in the Canadian western North West, and, as he says, he is not used to dreary overcast coastal winters, much preferring the Yukon where the sun shines brilliantly at 20 below.

Christopher Priest brings us much closer to home with 'Men of Good Value' which he has chosen to present in a most unusual way, thereby lending his basic premise a dreadful realism; for, of course, such a situation as he suggests could never find its way into our society, could it? In Volume 22 of *New Writings in SF* Mr. Priest's novella 'The Inverted World' appeared and this convoluted story, extensively revised and enlarged into novel length, has recently been drawing much critical acclaim.

The middle Enigma of the trio by Brian W. Aldiss here presented. 'The Daffodil Returns the Smile', – number XI in *New Writings* reckoning – is longer than usual and contains many amusing and penetrating glances – both sidelong and revealing – at an area of science fantasy the pursuit of which, one is prevailed upon to believe, cost Brian Aldiss many pleasant if devious hours in his research for *The Billion Year Spree*.

Cherry Wilder, whose 'The Ark of James Carlyle' in Volume 24, was so well-received, appears again with 'The Phobos Transcripts', and this time her story is very different in presentation, leaving a taste of uneasiness about the hard practicality of men in space.

Uneasiness is one of the themes of David Garnett's 'The Man Who', an area in which, with 'Now Hear the Word' in Volume 24, he has tended to specialize just recently.

Laurence James, whose Simon Rack novels are establishing a character in the sf scene, uncompromisingly deals with happiness. He gives a loving attention to detail that touches and holds us in a world where genuinely natural happiness seems ever more difficult to discover as it is buried beneath

the onslaughts of vicarious variety, even though we long for just one day of absolute perfection.

Another new writer to these pages, Ramsey Campbell, has had much published in the Lovecraftian tradition, a background he has now outgrown, and his story 'Murders' is concerned with the theme of separating the will and the deed, the private and the public. It leaves us with the feeling that the day-to-day uses of science and technology must inevitably bring with them new ways of looking at old laws.

'To the Pump Room with Jane', by Ian Watson, a writer just making his mark on the sf scene, is his first story for *New Writings in SF*. The origins of this story would appear at first sight to be a miscegenation, a hundred and sixty years apart, between the novels of a certain spinster and the work of modern sf practitioners; but a second look, I think, bearing in mind the irony inherent in the situation, tends to make one feel they were made for each other.

Of the ten writers represented in this volume, five have been published before in these pages, and three have appeared elsewhere before their first appearance here. The final two – who between them have written a story that crosses several fictional frontiers – appear here for the very first time in print. Ritchie Smith and Thomas Penman say of their story: 'For "The Seafarer", whatever its eccentricities, was at least conceived as an attempt to shatter the axioms of conventional science fiction; it was our sincere attempt to introduce something original in the way of characterization, style and Zeitgeist.' They add that they have further collaborative work in process of fruition, and suggest that time will show whether or not these zestful and exhilarating aims will join the general fructification.

And this, of course, brings us back to the success of *New Writings in SF* which, over the past ten years, has succeeded so admirably where so many other similar attempts have failed. I believe I speak for the whole readership of NW when I say that I see the next ten years as a decade of further progress when we will be enthralled and stimulated by many stories, enjoyable and thought-provoking, touching

upon every aspect of the sf field. Changes also affect other areas of life, not least the meeting-habits of sf readers, writers, editors, artists, publishers and agents. The London Circle has been meeting regularly at the Globe in Hatton Garden for the last twenty-one years. During that period almost every sf notable has paid a visit and signed the book, and it is true to say that the London Circle is the most famous and widely-known sf group in the world. Now the London Circle has moved to The One Tun in Saffron Hill, where, every first Thursday of the month, the subject is sf – and any and everything else you can think of.

Horsmonden,
May, 1974.

Kenneth Bulmer

NEW WRITINGS IN SF

26



A PLANET CALLED CERVANTES

by

JOHN KEITH

The porcine mutants of Rengol, victorious in their might, had a final reckoning to make with the remnants of the Keridish Empire. They were spacing in and exulting in their victory to answer a last dying challenge. They did not know what Kerrender knew, what he lived with day and night, what tortured him with superhuman agony. They did not know that on Rawn had died the Thirty Thousand . . .

A PLANET CALLED CERVANTES

OUT of nightmare he came, on the tail of the star-storm. Slipping down from the seas of space in his sliver ship, he eluded their radar with the ease of much experience. That is how Kerrender came to the planet called Cervantes.

On Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

Thus the refrain that haunted his nights and his days, for he was Kerrender, and he was Rawn, and the nightmare from which he fled he carried with him through waking and through sleep, and there was never an end to it.

On Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

And the backlash of the dis-guns' sun-brilliant beams blinded his eyes again, while Kerrender left his sliver ship and walked to a field-side tavern on a planet called Cervantes, his darkness lit by the intermittent explosions of the star shells in the time when his old life had ended and when his new life had barely begun.

He threw open the door on a scene of Spanish gaiety; of the swirling, fiery Flamenco rhythms, and the dark-skinned peasants of a colonial planet. But *these* peasants were suddenly afraid. In the last, desperate days of the Veridish Empire's crumbling, who knew what the seas of space might cast upon their shores? And the music died, and the men turned, and looked upon a figure out of nightmare.

Stooping to enter, he straightened to a towering seven foot five, his emaciated body close-wrapped in a black Sal-trun cloak. His ravaged face was an alien wedge of wide-set amber eyes whose epicanthic fold paid tribute to an ancient terrestrial strain, olive-sallow skin (but of a different sallowness from that of the Cervanteans: if *only* it hadn't been so different!), and a cruel, thin slit of a mouth, almost lipless.

And his eyes—*Madre de Dios*—those eyes! They were windows into hell.

All in that room cowered at the look of the man who was Kerrender, who was Rawn.

But they came of a proud tradition.

And that was Kerrender's undoing, as it had been before. For, in the last days of a dying Empire, no man who came out of night as came Kerrender could expect a reception without suspicion and fear upon a backwater planet such as this.

Still—they offered him courtesy. Before Kerrender could speak, one rose whose name was Valdez, and he bowed as had those before him in a long-dead, sun-drenched land.

He said: '*Por favor, señor,*' then, realizing his guest wouldn't know this language, switched to Galactic: 'Greetings, sire—join us in a cup of wine.'

Kerrender showed irritation, for in his old life before the moment of truth of the star shells and the dis-guns, he had been an aristocrat, and arrogant. Old habits, as some men, die hard . . .

But on Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

The first wave had been beaten back with staggering losses, and he remembered the invaders' outraged surprise, as if such a thing couldn't happen to them. And then they cut loose with everything. If *only* they had listened, if only they had not been such stupid peasants. And here before him was another roomful of stupid peasants.

His voice was a hollow hiss of High Galactic—that dialect which afforded such pride to the elect of the Veridish Empire. And had become the hallmark of hatred to all others.

He said: 'Sorry, brothers . . . no time. A Rengol attack force will be here by morning. Must replenish my fuel from your bunkers. You they will not bother, but *me*—'

And he saw that he had said the wrong thing again in that damned High Galactic.

Valdez' face darkened until it was almost ebony at the insult for he was not half as stupid as Kerrender assumed.

His low Galactic came viciously: 'So, we are not worth

plundering, but still good enough to get fuel from, is that it?

He leaped to the doorway where Kerrender stood, towering over him, and the silence of the room was shattered by a whipcrack as he backhanded the face of Rawn itself. Then all hell broke loose.

For Kerrender's reaction came from the very marrow of his bones. He chopped Valdez in the throat with a vicious blur of speed (it had been drilled into him at fourteen . . . if they were ever insolent enough to touch you . . . and this one had *slapped*)—he chopped so viciously the Cervantes man flew back over two tables before his body dropped like a spent rag doll, head rolling limply on a broken spine.

Other Cervanteans flung themselves upon him from nearby tables and little that availed them but death and broken limbs. They still didn't know they were trying to fight a man *reckoned the equal of twenty elite combat soldiers of the Veridish Empire*. For the Kreld training lies not only in the knowledge of where and how to chop—it lies in the reflex speed. This Kerrender, this very Rawn, had a reflex speed two and a half times that of the fastest normal soldier! It wasn't a fight, a good barroom brawl such as the Cervanteans adored—it was a slaughter.

When ten men lay dead and another six with broken limbs, those stupid peasants saw that their reality-view of what was happening was at fault. It bore so little resemblance to the facts that it became obvious here was something drastically different from the man they had thought to pound to a pulp. Drawing back to a safe distance, they saw a monster in the shape of a Galactic man.

Kerrender perceived the irony of this. It was his Nemesis again, in a different guise. The more it changed, the more it was the same, as that wise ancient had said so long ago.

And on Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

For, while he fought, the star shells burst about him and the cries from the communicators erupted like mad background music to the nightmare that never ceased, but only diminished at times, and his very sensory perceptions were

overlaid with the night-black sky of Rawn as it died, and, like a Phoenix, was reborn again—

To a living breathing reality in him, Kerrender.

Their fears ebbing, the Cervanteans realized there was another way of getting at him. And those at the rear of the tavern made certain signs to their comrades, whose eyes lighted in understanding. Kerrender's Krel training included an extreme sensitivity: he was immediately aware of something transpiring at the back of the tavern. When he heard the closing door, he turned to run.

And stopped. For in all those furious moments of battle, he had forgotten one all-important fact: *his sliver ship wasn't going anywhere until he refuelled.*

They had brought up a self-propelled seige gun when he came onto the field. A relic dating back to the Interregnum. His savage, wedge-shaped face split in a brief smile at the gun's vintage. They thought they had him. But he must dissuade them from this.

Kerrender of Rawn spread his arms wide in the Galactic sign of surrender. The men on the siege gun seemed non-plussed that they should have compelled surrender from a being such as this. Then, with typical Spanish appreciation, they smiled widely.

Por Dios, this one was much man!

For a moment, no one moved on either side. Then Kerrender advanced upon the gun crew, still holding his hands in the gesture of surrender. They tensed momentarily, then relaxed. He of Rawn saw by that relaxing that he was through the first barrier: they had accepted him as a *man*, a member of their in-group, no longer a monster they might dispatch in any way.

He halted ten metres from the gun.

'It was well-fought,' he said, 'but too one-sided. You see, I have the Krel training.'

Backward they might be, yet still they had heard of the Krel training. Now there was awe in their eyes.

Kerrender went on: 'The error was in two things: one, the way I was taught to speak, about which I can do little—' his Krel-sharp senses saw them relax even more; he was

gaining status—the other, the way I reacted, which was wrong, but the bases of this lie deep. It is not always possible to curb such a reaction in the stark necessity of the moment.’

He bowed. ‘Senors, for this I can only accept the responsibility and apologize profoundly.’

Both sides knew this would not restore life to the dead, or health to broken limbs, but these were people of a tradition which respected nobility, even from an enemy. The gesture was irresistible.

That gun crew descended to the ground and responded to his courtesy, bowing. He had done what he could to heal the communications breach. But he knew there was still a price to be paid. And deep within, Kerrender groaned silently.

For on Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

And the ripples of that original terrible fact kept spreading outwards.

In his mind’s eye, he saw the legend which was cut into the stone above the entrance to the Hall of Truth on Rawn: *Abandon vanity all ye who enter here. Step out of the snare of illusion, though the way be long.*

And he heard again the voice of Alarish, his mentor, as he had heard it so often during his years on Rawn:

‘Kerrender, O Kerrender, how many times must I remind you? You are no longer a high-born aristocrat of the Empire. You gave all that up when you came here to study with us. *Humble yourself before the inner truth, and that truth shall make you free.* But the first step is to abandon vanity. You must yield up that bone-bred pride that family and Empire have conditioned into you almost from birth. I know it’s difficult; it’s probably more difficult for you than for anybody who ever came here. But it’s no less essential.’

And vanity was still his undoing, even here on Cervantes, he realized, as the leader of the gun crew stepped forward.

‘Honour demands a settlement, *senor*,’ he said, simply, and Kerrender could only nod. He must be here until morning in any event.

‘My name is Rodriguez. And I claim the satisfaction of a *duello* with flame-whips.’

Flame-whips? They saw he didn't understand.

The Cervantean spread wide his hands.

'We are cattlemen, *senor*, as were our forebears. We herd our cows in the old way with electronically-charged flame-whips. For the *duello* between *caballeros*, they are turned up to the killing-point.'

Kerrender saw the jaws of Nemesis closing upon him again. The star shells burst in his mind as desperation almost overwhelmed him, but the stark reality remained and it said: *no way out.*

Unless—

He indicated the small black mark high on his forehead that was pulsing madly.

'*Senor*,' he said in a voice suddenly hoarse, 'look upon this symbol. It bears an important message.'

All the Cervanteans looked at that pulsing black mark the High Ones of Rawn had set upon Kerrender's forehead, and these words formed in their minds:

'To all who would place this man in a mortal situation—*be warned*. You stand in the presence of one of the most dangerous beings in this galaxy! As you value life and limb, never force him to use or respond to destructive energy of any kind. We, the High Ones of Rawn, warn you most solemnly: *you stand in the presence of Death.*'

Even on a backward planet such as this, they had heard of the High Ones of Rawn. The Veridish Empire's planet of wisdom, Rawn had stood like a beacon-light upon the shores of their perceptions. But the Empire was coming down about their ears, its death-cries echoing to the assaults of the Rengol barbarians, and its crumbling threatened to carry with it all vestiges of a civilization that had lasted fifty thousand years. Chilled by that dread pronunciamiento they were, but intimidated—no longer!

The Cervanteans looked their scepticism. Their leader gazed with surprise and the contempt of a man who has been disappointed in what he thought to be a noble enemy.

The star shells bursting within him, Kerrender recognized that contempt. He had made the gesture. But it was no use;

the old respect, and the fear of reprisal that had always accompanied it, were gone. Anything that smacked of the Empire was now a thing suspect.

'Show me where you would hold this *duello*,' he said.

Two aircars were brought from a hangar. With a pilot, Kerrender entered one; the second was occupied by Rodriguez and his pilot.

Lifting from the spacefield with tremendous noise—they were powered by rickety, ancient rockets—the two cars headed out across the plateau towards nearby mountains. Twenty minutes later they descended upon a large open space under the peaks. Not quite a plateau, it was still large enough for manoeuvring.

The first purple light of dawn softened the sky as they issued from the aircars with their flame-whips. It was still too dark for the *duello*, so the group sat near the cars, watching the sun come up. It was a G-type star, somewhat smaller than Kerrender's own Valgor.

As they waited, he of Rawn said, softly: 'You witnessed my speed back there during the fight?'

Rodriguez' eyes revealed his fear.

'I saw,' he said, slowly. 'But honour demands a reckoning, *senor*.'

Kerrender understood: the inexorable necessity of his proud background made backing down unthinkable.

At that moment, he liked the Cervantean very much. He said: 'My reflexes shall be as close to your own as possible.'

Appreciation was warm in the other's dark brown eyes.

The purple light became stronger. It was time.

They stood, flicking their whips experimentally. Kerrender's companion of the aircar took the flame-whip and showed him the motions of the wrist involved.

The tall man's Krel-trained perceptions instantly assimilated the data. He took the flame-whip from the other and at once demonstrated a mastery that made the Cervantean's eyes big.

Positioning themselves twenty metres apart—the full reach of both whips—they waited, Rodriguez tense,

Kerrender relaxed. Standing to one side, the Cervantean from Kerrender's aircar took a bright red bandana from his pocket, holding it high. Then he brought it down with sudden finality.

As he did so, Rodriguez' whip lashed with expertness at the tall man's head. But his Krel-d-trained perceptions had noted the bunching of the muscles: when the whip-end flashed blue fire, Kerrender was safely out of reach. His own flame-whip cracked at Rodriguez, who barely evaded.

The pilots retreated to their machines, lifting them into the air to watch the *duello* safely.

Kerrender fought to the accompaniment of bursting star shells and the mad background music of the communicators. Like a second reality striving to assert its primacy, the night-black sky of Rawn in its moment of truth superimposed itself upon the purple morning light of a planet called Cervantes, and the nightmare within Kerrender waxed like a floodtide.

On Rawn died the Thirty Thousand . . .

Then another awareness invaded Kerrender's consciousness, edging out his nightmare. The unmistakable sensation of many spaceships planeting. The sort of perception only a Krel-d-trained spaceman could have received. The Rengol attack force had arrived.

This was what he had been waiting for. There was no more time to waste. Flicking the flame-whip a little faster, he caught Rodriguez's whip handle with his own. The killing power was muted. A sudden, bluish flash, the strong odour of ozone, and Rodriguez's unconscious body hit the ground. At least, he hadn't had to kill a brave man.

The aircars descended. Kerrender jumped into his, while the other pilot retrieved Rodriguez. Then they were flashing back to the spacefield.

Kerrender's pilot seemed worried. His Galactic slurred, he said:

'Senor, there's trouble at the field. Barbarians have landed—'

Kerrender nodded. 'The Rengol attack force. I warned you they were coming last night.'

The pilot's dark features were heavy with dread.

'What can we do?'

Kerrender glanced at him, surprised.

'Do? There's nothing you can do. You have nothing here to stand a chance against a full Rengol attack force.' He looked grimly ahead. 'They're not here to take Cervantes, in any event. They've come for me.'

The pilot glanced again at Kerrender.

'A full attack force just for you?' he whispered.

Kerrender said no more, but a strange fierce light glinted in his amber eyes.

When they came in over the spacefield, the tall man saw the landing-craft of the Rengols ringing it at a fifty metre height. He smiled. As the pilot saw that smile, he shuddered.

The other reality within Kerrender waxed with the flare of the star shells and the dis-guns in Rawn's night-black sky. But he thrust it away with icy self-control.

His towering figure stepped majestically from the aircar. He walked slowly towards the waiting group beside the tavern, towards Cervanteans and Rengol officers in their bright green field uniforms. The Rengols were porcine mutants from the Empire's edge. They stood, on average, about five feet.

The biggest—he was closer to six feet—stepped forward. His black button eyes were angry, the warrior's crest erect upon his head.

The Rengol demanded: 'Where is the Keridish battle squadron we were to meet here?'

Kerrender's face was expressionless, but the amber eyes flamed.

'It stands before you, Rengol.'

The mutant's eyes blazed dangerously.

'What kind of jest is this?'

The black mark on Kerrender's forehead was pulsing with insistence. He pointed to it.

'No jest. Listen to the warning of the High Ones of Rawn.'

The brutish-looking officer roared: 'We have heard of this

so-called warning, you *snarbatch*! And accord it no more attention that it deserves. For your insolence—prepare to die!”

He leaped backwards, spoke into a wrist communicator. The Rengol officers activated opalescent force screens as their landing crafts’ big dis-guns zeroed in on Kerrender.

On Rawn died the Thirty Thousand. . . . And now on Cervantes—a reckoning?

The dis-guns thundered. Kerrender’s tall form was spotlighted in the unbearable intensity of the beams. But his body didn’t burst into its constituent atoms. Lifting slowly into the air, his body floated in a horizontal position, while a fantastic turbulence swirled about it.

Like the centre of some extraordinary whirlpool, Kerrender bent the unthinkable energy of the dis-guns around him, to spin their raging beams faster and faster.

Within him there was no pain. It had been like this on Rawn during the final attack when they used all their energy weapons—an exalted sensation of his own strength, and of his unique talent. The High Ones of Rawn had told him of this early in his training, and then, when the Rengols unleashed their full-scale bombardment, Kerrender used it as he had always known he must.

As he did again at this moment.

He bent the energy around him while its intensity pyramided—*Then threw it back upon its senders.*

This time there was no backlash as there had been when he was still new to his powers.

The Rengol landing-craft were blasted out of the air by their own dis-beams. But it didn’t stop there; a ravening energy-tide shot up out of the atmosphere, seeking the battle fleet in orbit. From dreadnought, to cruiser, to destroyer, it flashed like a forest fire out of control, until there was nothing but atom-blasted wreckage.

Thirty seconds it took. A Rengol task force of thirty thousand and three hundred ships—obliterated. The only survivors, half a dozen ashen-faced officers near the tavern.

Kerrender of Rawn advanced towards them.

Face pale, he said: 'Now you know. But do you understand?'

They gaped at him with utter incomprehension.

'Of course, you don't. Who could? When I trained with the High Ones of Rawn, they discovered I had a strange talent: I can take an energy beam of any strength and twist it around myself, pyramiding its intensity until it reaches a critical point. Then I hurl it back upon its senders.'

The Cervanteans stared at him in open-mouthed surprise.

The big Rengol who had talked to him earlier started to show signs of returning intelligence.

It was time to wind things up. Kerrender took off his Sal-trun cloak. Beneath was the scarlet field tunic of a senior officer of the Keridish Navy.

He asked: 'Whom do I address?'

The green uniformed mutant looked startled. 'Why, I'm Major-General Keritsov of Rengol Marines.'

'And I, by special decree of my Emperor, am Kerrender, late of Rawn—now a seven-star Admiral in the Keridish Navy. I have Special Envoy's powers and am ready to receive the unconditional surrender of all Rengol forces operating in the Empire. Has your General Headquarters observed this?'

The porcine mutant nodded. 'It has. They were curious when we received the intelligence that a unit of the Keridish Navy would meet us here in battle. As you know——' he looked embarrassed—'your Navy has been avoiding any such contact for the last month.'

Kerrender said: 'Correct. They have declined battle, as ordered, until I could be deployed to engage you. The war is over, Keritsov. There's nothing in the known universe that can destroy me. I stand ready to accept your unconditional surrender as an emissary of the Rengol Navy. The documents can be signed later by our diplomats.'

The Rengol consulted his wrist communicator. Then he looked up at Kerrender and nodded.

'My General Staff agrees. They have conferred on me Extraordinary Envoy's powers to formalize the surrender, as

of this date. Our military forces are now being recalled and have been instructed not to give battle to any Keridish forces they may encounter. A special ship is being dispatched from our nearest base to pick up my group.'

Kerrender nodded. 'Good.' Then, turning to the watching Cervanteans, he said:

'Senors, I would appreciate your refuelling my ship while we wait. You will be reimbursed by the Keridish Navy.'

One of the Cervanteans darted away.

Kerrender and Keritsov talked over the arrangements concerning their respective forces until the main guidelines had been established. The Rengol was cooperative and almost likeable now that hostilities were over. Finally, he looked at Kerrender, said slowly:

'Your dreadful talent will not have to be used again, Admiral. Do you plan to relinquish your Navy status now and return to the planet of wisdom?'

Kerrender's eyes were amber pools of agony. 'I can never return to Rawn, Keritsov. It's a blasted cinder. The Thirty Thousand High Ones were destroyed when I smashed your attack force.'

The Rengol officer was puzzled. 'I don't understand.'

The space-dark sky of Rawn superimposed itself upon his vision and the star shells burst again as they would for Kerrender until the day he died.

In a dead voice, he said: 'This is the terrible responsibility I carry. Not that I destroyed your attack force. That was inescapable necessity. But that all those I held closest were wiped out by the backlash of that energy. You see, I was new to my powers in those days, and couldn't prevent the backlash.'

He turned, walked slowly across the field to his ship as the Rengol cruiser planeted. Kerrender took off within moments of their departure.

In the far reaches of the galaxy, Kerrender of Rawn's sliver ship will sometimes be spotted, and those who see him will attempt to do honour to the man who saved an Empire.

But Kerrender, aristocrat and last of the High Ones of Rawn, seldom acknowledges communications.

MEN OF GOOD VALUE

by

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

The writer and angle character of this story, although sharing the same name, are not the same, and 'Men of Good Value' should not be regarded as a first person story told in the third person. One is tempted to envisage academics of the future studiously engaged in literary research coming to conclusions about the writer Chris Priest based on evidence contained in this story on the character Chris Priest. The charm of this conceit would be well appreciated in a society where the media laboured so impartially with partial attitudes.

MEN OF GOOD VALUE

I STOOD near the edge of the cliff, adopting what I hoped would appear to a casual onlooker to be a literary posture. I had one foot braced against a low rock protruding from the turf, and the other leg straight behind me. My arms were folded and I frowned down intensely, watching the sea breaking white against the rocks at the foot of the cliffs. There was, as far as I knew, no one around, but in solitude one often imagines an unseen watcher and hopes to project an image of oneself for that person. I was intending by my stance to surround myself with an aura of profundity and creativity, dreaming unimaginable dreams while communing with nature. In fact, my feet were damp and I was feeling cold, and I was about to return to the village for a beer or two before lunch.

The coastline at this point was not spectacular in its beauty, but it had for me the merits of wildness and ruggedness. The only sign of habitation, provided I did not look back towards the village, was the coastguard's look-out post, still flying its warning flag for the storm of the day before.

The loneliness suited me; I had come on an impulse to this village for a week's winter holiday, responding to an overwhelming desire to get away from London long enough to remind myself that there were still parts of England that weren't overcrowded. The summer tourist season was still several weeks away, and as far as I knew I was the only visitor at the moment.

The village was one I had discovered the previous summer. It was situated at the southernmost end of a rea—one of those uniquely Cornish river-mouths that are half-way between inlet and estuary—and was sheltered from

the south-westerly winds by the bulk of cliff that lay between it and the sea.

On the opposite bank of the river was a small town; both communities were supported by a china-clay port a mile or two up-river. In London we would have referred to the village as a dormitory suburb of the town, for there was virtually nothing there apart from the houses, two pubs and a tiny hotel. All the usual services—banks, shops, post-office, a cinema—were in the town across the water. The only means of transport between the two was a small passenger-ferry which, weather permitting, crossed at twenty-minute intervals all through the day. Further up the river, near the china-clay depot, there was a car-ferry, but to reach it from the village entailed, because of the many inlets and hills around, a drive across-country of some four or five miles.

I enjoyed living in the village, if only temporarily. It was genuinely isolated, and although it was in no way picturesque or Cornish-cute, it had a distinctly amenable atmosphere. Furthermore, unlike other parts of the West Country it was a thriving community in its own right; the port was always busy, and people lived and worked here.

Done with my literary posturing for the day, I walked back over the crest of the hill, and went down through the narrow streets towards the pub by the quay.

As I reached the bottom of the hill, where there is a steep, curving approach to the quayside, a man of about my own age came down the hill from the opposite direction. I guessed immediately that he was not a local man; his clothes and his hair were as out of place as mine. As he walked towards me our glances met briefly, and for a moment there was that indefinable sense of recognition that occasionally passes between strangers. We both turned towards the quay, and I surmized that we had seen in each other's appearance the ineradicable mark of London living, and only that.

However, after a few more seconds he came over to me. 'I know you,' he said. 'We've met before.'

I stared at him for a moment. His face was not unfamiliar.

'You're . . . in television, aren't you?' I said.

'That's it. Frank. Frank Mattinson.' He extended his hand, and we shook warmly. His name still meant nothing to me, and clearly he did not know mine. 'You're . . . let me see. Don't tell me. Science fiction . . . something to do with that?'

'That's right. I'm a writer.'

'Clive! Clive . . .'

'Chris Priest,' I said.

'Chris! Of course. What the hell are you doing here?'

'Just a holiday,' I said.

'Perfect!'

We walked on down towards the quay.

As we spoke, my memory had placed him. About three years before, Frank Mattinson had telephoned me. He had obtained my phone number from my publishers, and was trying to put together an item about SF for one of the late-night current-affairs programmes. As I was the only person he could locate, he wanted me to ring round to everyone I could think of and muster support and provide him with a studioful of SF-writers debating something or other. This I'd done—there'd been a small research-fee offered—and eventually an interview had been taped. It was never broadcast as far as I know, and that had been an end to it. I'd met Frank just once at that time, and the only thing I could now remember about him was that he had bought me a salad in the studio canteen at Hammersmith.

'I was just going for a drink,' I said, nodding towards *The Lugger*.

'Let me get you one.'

Inside it was warm and stuffy. I found an empty table near the fire, and in a moment Frank came over with two pints of bitter and two pasties.

'Stroke of luck meeting you here,' he said. 'You're just the man we want.'

'How's that?' I said.

'Never forgotten that science fiction programme. Good value. One of the best we ever did. Like to do some more of that. Listen, I read one of your books recently.'

'Oh yes?' I said, having followed the cause-and-effect of

his words with considerable interest. Dramatization offer coming up?

'Always have been a sci-fi fan myself. Can't get enough of it. You say you're on holiday down here?'

'Just a short break,' I said, disappointed with the way the conversation had suddenly changed direction again. 'I needed some fresh air.'

'You wouldn't give us a few minutes of your time, and let us film you?'

'Doing what?' I said.

'Just answering a few questions. We're filming in the town. Stroke of luck meeting you.'

'I've never been on television,' I said uncertainly. 'I'm not sure I'd have anything to say. Is the programme about SF?'

'About what?'

'Science fiction.'

'Oh ... of course not. It's a documentary about tourism.'

I said: 'I can't honestly think I'd have anything to say about that ...'

'You'll think of something. You've got opinions, haven't you?'

'Yes, but—'

'You're ideal. Lots of personality, a solid reputation, local figure.'

'Frank, I don't live here.'

'Never mind. You're here and we can use you. Good value, sci-fi. All bloody locals down here, don't speak a word of English. Drink up. We're shooting this afternoon.'

My pasty was going cold, so I diverted my attention to this instead. Meanwhile, Frank continued with his appraisal of my abilities.

'We need someone articulate,' he said. 'Can't do much with the locals. Anyway, they all live here. We want the opinion of someone who can see the place objectively. A typical tourist, if you like. We were planning to stop one of the grockle cars coming off the car-ferry, but you're much better. Famous sci-fi writer, and all that.'

'I've had a couple of books published. That doesn't make me famous.'

'Yes it does. Look, come on over and meet the others. Then you can make your mind up.'

Frank took a large mouthful of pasty, and washed it down with beer.

'By the way,' I said. 'What's a grockle?'

'Local word for a tourist.'

'So you have spoken to local people?'

'One or two.'

Much as I dislike boats—especially small ones in rough water—I had grown very fond of the ferry. Its tireless chugging from one side of the river to the other was a prosaic journey, and yet each trip I took seemed different from all the others. Perhaps to the locals it was as humdrum as London Transport was to me; I enjoyed, though, the mild sensation of adventure. After all, Underground trains rarely seem in much danger of capsizing in a hundred feet of cold water.

As Frank and I boarded the tiny cabin-cruiser, his flow of chatter ceased for a moment. Then, when the boat was in mid-river, he said: 'By the way, how do you feel about sex on television?'

'Not much room for it,' I said. 'Not for two, anyway.'

He laughed uproariously at my feeble joke, and I concluded that a few days in the West Country must have softened his wit.

'Very good. But seriously Cl . . . I mean, Chris, do you find sex on television offensive?'

'I don't watch much television,' I admitted. 'I sent the set back last year when the government prohibited colour transmissions.'

'Yes, we lost a lot of viewers then. But you must see it occasionally. Suppose there's a play on, and someone appears in the nude . . . would you feel like ringing up to complain?'

'Not at all,' I said. 'I'm against any form of censorship.'

'Yes, yes. Of course. But wouldn't you agree that excessive sex is offensive?'

'Almost anything taken to excess is offensive,' I said, painfully aware of the fact that the other passengers on the ferry must have been overhearing our conversation.

'That's fine. I'm glad we agree. How about politics? Never mind about television ... do you think the government is doing a good job?'

'I suppose so,' I said. 'I didn't vote for them.'

He looked at me with renewed interest. 'Then you would describe yourself as being against the government?'

I said: 'At the last election I didn't know what to do, so I voted Liberal. Or at least I think I did. I got the names mixed up.'

'But that book of yours I read was politically committed. The one advocating racialism.'

I winced, and hoped no one on the boat had heard that.

'If it's the one I think you mean, it didn't exactly advocate it,' I said, but not confidently.

'Yes it did. It was a fine call to arms for all right-thinking men. At least,' and he lowered his voice unexpectedly, 'it would be as well, when you meet Patrick, to bear that in mind.'

'Who's Patrick?'

'The producer of the documentary.'

As the ferry bumped against the town jetty, I said: 'Are you sure this film's about tourism, Frank?'

'Of course ... what else goes on in this Godforsaken hole?'

'You've made me wonder,' I said.

Tourism, I reflected as we walked along the street from the jetty, was not a subject I had given much thought to. I wondered if, when put to the test in front of Frank's camera, I'd have anything at all to say.

I suddenly remembered a notion I had once had for a short story. It concerned an observation I had made that, almost without exception, foreign tourists were exceedingly ugly. I had never written the story, mainly because having made that observation—one which, incidentally, can be borne out by random sampling—I couldn't see a plot developing from

it. And I didn't think Frank would be much interested in this either.

'Down here,' Frank said, leading the way along a narrow alley which went back down the hill in the direction of the river.

It opened out after a few yards into a small and pleasant square, against one side of which was the back of a building I recognized as the town hall, and on the opposite side of which was a pub. The far side of the square abutted on to the waterfront; here there was a narrow road, and beyond this a concrete pedestrian promenade, stretching in one direction towards the jetty, and in the other towards the pier where in the summer months, motor-boats could be hired.

Several tall arc-lamps had been erected in the square, and a young man stood by the opened rear doors of a van, connecting up a complicated piece of switching gear. Inside the van I could see several pieces of equipment, and a diesel generator.

Frank led me towards the door to the saloon-bar, on which someone had pinned a printed notice saying: *Television Personnel Only*.

A girl was sitting by herself at a table near the door. While Frank spoke to her, I appraised her quickly. She looked nice.

'Is Pat here?' said Frank.

'Round the corner in the other bar.' She glanced briefly at me. 'Who's this?'

'This is ...'

'Chris,' I said.

'Chris. He's a famous author. He wants to take part in the film. Chris ... meet Tina.'

We shook hands, and she gave me a pleasant smile; indeed, it was the sunniest part of the day so far. Before I could say anything to her, Frank moved off. I let go of Tina's hand and followed him with a reluctance tempered by curiosity.

'Pat,' said Frank, when we reached the other bar. 'Look who I've found. Chris Priest. He writes sci-fi.'

Patrick was a balding, red-faced man in his middle years.

He sat awkwardly on a bar-stool, leaning forward with his elbows on the counter, but with his feet resting on one of the rungs of the stool so that his large buttocks bulged over the back edge of the seat. He had a glass of scotch on the counter in front of him, and as we arrived he had been talking to a man sitting beside him. As Frank spoke to him, he looked up in my direction, and I saw that his eyes were bloodshot and watery. He was clearly rather drunk.

'Hi, Chris,' he said. 'What are you drinking?'

'I'll have a small scotch, please.'

'Double scotch for my guest,' Patrick said to the barmaid, then turned back to me. 'Frank's briefed you, I suppose. We want good, hard-hitting stuff. Don't pull any punches . . . go over the top if you like. We can always take it out later if it's too strong.'

'Chris has written a book about racialism,' said Frank.

'Pro or anti?'

I opened my mouth. Frank said quickly: 'Pro.'

'Good man. Just the stuff. Don't overdo it, just keep hinting at it. You can play up the anti-promiscuity message for all you're worth, though.'

'Promiscuity?'

'Yeah . . . you know. Girl tourists sleeping around, nude swimming. That kind of disgusting behaviour.'

I found mention of the word 'tourists' reassuring; I was by now convinced that I had, after all, misheard Frank in the first place.

'You want me to talk about promiscuous tourists?' I said.

'I want you to *attack* promiscuous tourists!' said Patrick. He swallowed the dregs of his drink, and banged the glass on the counter to attract the barmaid's attention. 'No . . . correct that. I'm not supposed to tell you what to say. Free speech, and all that. I'll leave it to you.'

'We could let Chris see the transcripts of yesterday's interviews,' said Frank.

There was a pile of notes on the bar, somewhat sodden with spilt drink, and Patrick riffled clumsily through them.

'They're here somewhere,' he said. 'Never mind. We had

the woman who runs the local watch-committee. Good value. She came down heavily on drug-pushers, how they infest the West Country during the summer. Said how she formed a local vigilante squad to keep them out of the town. That tied in nicely with some library footage we've got, of hippies on the beach at Torquay. A few years back, mind, but no one will ever know. Then we asked her about her views on unmarried couples who take holidays together. Might have to cut some of her answer, but we've got enough. Good strong stuff about pre-marital sex causing VD. Tell you what, Chris ... how do you feel about foreigners invading our native shores?

'Foreign tourists?' I said.

'That's it. They come swarming over here in the summer. The locals don't like them ... all the French kids getting drunk on wine and smoking those strong cigarettes. Not British ... you with me?'

'I rather like the French,' I said.

'OK ... say what you like. We can always add emphasis with a few cut-aways while you're talking.'

Abruptly, he seemed to lose interest, and turned back to the man sitting beside him.

'Another drink?' Frank said to me.

'No thanks. I haven't finished this one yet.'

Frank said in a confidential voice: 'If I were you, Chris, I'd stick to what I know best. You're good on racialism, talk about that.'

'I think I'd rather not.' I finished my scotch, and put the glass down on the counter. 'Let's face it, Frank, I can't offer you much. I'm not sure I'd say what you want to hear. Thanks for the drink.'

I edged towards the door, but Frank followed quickly.

'Hey, you can't run out on us. You're the very man we want for this.'

'It's not my thing,' I said. 'I don't want to be seen on television talking about pre-marital sex with French drug-peddlers. I thought the film was about tourism.'

Behind us I heard Patrick banging his glass again for attention.

Frank looked at me thoughtfully. 'It's a bit strong for you, is it? OK, I understand. Sometimes we find people who aren't too happy with the way we work. But listen . . . I've got one more idea. Have you heard that there's a scheme here to build an entertainments complex? Bingo, ten-pin bowling, cabaret, discotheque . . . all that kind of thing under one vast roof.'

'The programme's going to be about that?' I said.

'Only in part. Can't dwell on it too much. Quite a few local people are against it.'

'So the film is going to debate the issue?'

'Debate's the wrong word . . . that implies two points of view. No, we're all for it . . . we want to portray this resort as a clean, family place. No drugs, no hippies, no foreign tourists . . . just good old Anglo-Saxon John Bull and his wife and kids.'

'I thought television was supposed to be impartial,' I said.

'You're living in the past, Chris.'

Just then the barmaid called Frank to the bar, and told him he was wanted on the telephone. Patrick and the other man were still talking, laughing and nudging each other. The only other person in the bar was Tina, so I went over to her.

'Are you really famous?' she said.

'Only for not paying my bills. What about you . . . are you with this lot?'

'I suppose so. It's unofficial because I'm not in the union, but Patrick got me the job of continuity. It's hell getting jobs in television these days.'

I sat down next to her.

'What's going on here?' I said. 'Frank told me this was a film about tourism, but all Pat wants me to talk about is fascism.'

She grinned at me. 'He's good at that. It's how he made his reputation. When Pat's drunk enough he can make a right-wing film about any subject under the sun.'

I said: 'Are you a . . . friend of Patrick's?'

She looked away from me. 'Not really. He thinks he's a

friend of mine. I just wanted a job. I keep him at arm's length.'

'Glad to hear it. Like another drink?'

'No thanks. We'll be shooting soon. Are you going to do an interview?'

'I'm not sure. I was just about to leave. Frank was trying to make me stay.'

'Why don't you?' she said. 'You wouldn't have to do much. If it goes against the grain don't answer the questions the way they want you to. Just say whatever you believe in, and if it's no good they won't use it. If they do decide to use the interview, anything you say will be distorted by the film-editor anyway to fit the message.'

'How's that?'

'Have you read Pudovkin?'

'No, but I've heard of him. The film-maker.'

'Right. He's one of Pat's heroes. I had to read one of his books before Pat got me the job. Pudovkin was the first man to discover that a film can have its meaning changed by showing the same shots in a different order. If it's done subtly enough, film can be used as a medium to support any political viewpoint.'

I said: 'So whatever I say on the film, with a bit of careful editing Patrick can make me sound fascist.'

'Right.'

'So in effect I can say whatever I like?'

'Yes. Will you do it?'

'Is it worth it?' I said.

'You won't get a fee.'

'I didn't mean that,' I said.

She nodded then, and it was worth it.

I was wandering around the square, looking at a clipboard of notes Tina had lent me, when Patrick came out of the bar. He stood at the door for a few moments, swaying slightly and blinking in the comparative brightness of daylight. The glare was indeed comparative, for in the last few minutes a heavy bank of cloud had swept in from the sea and a down-pour of rain seemed unavoidable.

One of the crew had been sitting in the driver's cab of the van, keeping warm by running the engine with the heater on. As he saw Patrick, though, he climbed out and went round to him.

'The generator's gone on the blink, Pat,' he said.

'Completely?' Pat turned unsteadily towards him.

'Yes . . . and we can't use the mains either.'

'We'll use available light. Only a shot or two to do. Tina!'

Tina appeared from inside the pub, pulling the hood of her duffel-coat over her head. The wind had stiffened, and was gusting around the square.

'Are there any available-light shots we can do from here?'

She took the clipboard from me. 'Only a few establishing shots of the river.'

'Too dark for that,' Patrick said immediately.

'What about me?' I said, moving forward. Patrick stared at me for a moment, and I gained the distinct impression that he had forgotten who I was.

'Not today,' he said, eventually. 'We need Ted for that.' He turned away and walked slowly over to where the camera-operator was pulling a large polythene cover over his camera.

'Who's Ted?' I said to Tina.

'Ted Lumley. He's the reporter, the man the viewers see on the film actually asking the questions. He's had to go back to the Plymouth studios today because they're re-dubbing the last film.'

'And changing the order of the shots?' I said.

She winked at me. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Frank Mattinson gave me the impression he wanted me to be interviewed now.'

'That's typical of him,' Tina said.

'Then there's no point me hanging around.'

'I wouldn't say that,' she said.

This seemed to be a further promising development, but just at that moment Patrick came back and placed his arm expansively around Tina's shoulders.

'Too dark for shooting today. We'll start first thing in the morning.' He glanced at me. 'Sorry, can't fit you in. Frank says you want to talk about the entertainments complex. Great stuff. You know what to say ... we don't want the viewers to think there's any dissenting voice.'

They headed back into the bar, and at last I decided there really was no further point in hanging around.

I stayed over in the town. I went first to a restaurant and had a meal, then caught the first house at the cinema. The film was one of those low-budget Westerns made in Spain or Italy, and I was totally unable to enjoy it; not because it was uninteresting, but because I couldn't get out of my head the image of a film-editor snipping away at the shots before the film reached the projector.

I left the cinema, and walked through the dark and deserted streets of the town. The wind was now blustery and cold, with rain stinging my face. I was quietly dreading the ferry across the river. The day before I had been confined in the village, as the gale had suspended all services; now the weather was rough enough to scare me stiff, but not so rough that the service would stop.

As I came to the top of the slope leading down to the jetty, I saw the boat heading away from the shore towards the village. Even there, in the lee of the bank, it seemed to me to be going up and down unpleasantly. I hunched my shoulders and thrust my hands deep into my pockets, resigned to a twenty-minute wait.

I walked slowly down the slope, and went into the concrete shelter. Tina was there, huddled inside her duffel-coat.

She said: 'You've missed the last boat. I heard them say it was getting too rough.'

'I've seen it rougher than this,' I said.

'It isn't coming back, Chris.'

I decided to believe her.

'I won't be able to get back to my hotel,' I said.

'I think I know a place you can stay.'

She slipped her hand into mine inside my pocket, and we walked back up into the town.

For the sake of her job, Tina went down to breakfast five minutes before me, and when I joined her she was sitting at a table with Patrick and Frank. They seemed quite unsurprised to see me.

I was just finishing my kippers when a tall young man, smartly dressed in a dark suit, came over to the table, drew up a chair and sat down between Frank and myself.

Tina said quickly: 'Ted ... this is Chris Priest. He's going to take part in the film.'

'Got something to say about the new complex, haven't you?' said Frank.

'I—yes.'

'Wonderful development, don't you think?' said Ted.

'Absolutely,' I said. Tina was drinking her coffee, but she caught my eye over the edge of the cup and I knew she was smiling.

'I'm glad you're with us on this, Chris,' said Ted, his face beaming. 'We need a good strong opinion. Er ... you've no financial interest in the complex, I suppose?'

'Of course not,' I said.

'Pity ... It would make your case stronger if you had. Never mind, it's only a small part of the film.' He turned to Frank. 'I had another idea on the drive down here this morning. I gather some of the local fishermen are against this complex because they say the sewage from it is going to be pumped straight into the sea. They think it's going to harm the lobster beds.'

'That's right,' said Frank. 'There's an item in the local paper this week.'

'Good. Then why don't we work some kind of insinuation into the commentary? Something to the effect that the traditional Cornish pastime of smuggling is getting under way again? And that this would be more difficult with a huge increase of visitors to the town? Then if we get one of the fishermen to speak up against the complex we'll know his motives, won't we?'

Throughout all this Patrick had been silent. I didn't care for the thoughtful way in which he was staring at me, then glancing at Tina. There had, after all, been that tapping at Tina's bedroom door at about one in the morning, and she'd whispered that it was Patrick's nightly attempt . . . but I wondered now how much he was beginning to connect in his mind.

Ted was saying: 'And I was thinking about the old biddy from the watch-committee. I thought perhaps while she's talking we could do a cut-away to someone prowling along a hotel corridor. Hint of promiscuous goings-on, don't you think?'

'Don't let's overdo it, Ted,' said Frank.

'We could always leave it out later if we don't like it. We could shoot it here, in this hotel. And look, couldn't Tina and this chap here' (me) 'do something that would—'

'Drop it, Ted,' Patrick said, sharply.

I poured myself some more coffee with considerable haste, spilling most of it into the saucer in the process.

'We don't want to overdo the visuals,' said Frank, carefully. 'After all, it wouldn't be right to give the impression that this is a *fun* town. I think Pat's right . . . we should play it straight. Let the words speak for themselves. Only if something needs underlining should we try to find a visual to fit it. That's how we've always worked.'

'OK,' said Ted, a little sulkily.

I followed the others down to the square to pick up the van and the two cars. It had been decided that I would be interviewed on the site of the proposed entertainments complex: high on a rocky promontory overlooking the mouth of the river.

On the drive up (without any kind of stage-management, I found myself in the back of a car with Tina) I was trying to adjust my own understanding of this place to the distorted quasi-reality the television crew was trying to project.

I saw the town as a rather graceful pastoral community, mildly conservative, very insular. As a tourist resort, it was the sort of place people passed through as they came off the

ferry; not the kind of seaside town where a married couple with kids would stay for a fortnight. I wondered how firm a proposal it was for this complex, and how much money was behind it, and whose. Would the National Trust—on whose land the complex was to be sited—stand for this kind of proposal for even one minute?

There was a long delay while the cameraman and his assistant set up the tripod and loaded the film-magazine on to the camera. The sound-recordist took a reading from my voice and set the level, and he and his assistant cursed at the amount of wind drumming against the microphone. In the background, Ted was going through the continuity-sheets with Tina, while Frank and Patrick sat together, sheltering from the wind in the back of the equipment van.

Finally, all was declared to be ready.

Ted came over and stood a disconcertingly short distance away from me, well inside my personal buffer zone. He took the microphone from the assistant sound-recordist, and held it out at chest-level between us.

'When you're ready, Chris,' he said, and I was reassured to see that he was sufficiently professional to realize I was quaking in my boots. 'Nothing to worry about. Just say what you feel, and if you muff it we can always edit it out later.'

I was too nervous even to ascribe an ulterior motive to his words.

Someone stepped in front of the camera and clacked a clapperboard (I hadn't realized that those things were actually used) and then—

'As a typical tourist,' said Ted in his television voice, 'how would you describe your reaction to an entertainments complex of the sort proposed?'

Never mind what I said. That's between me and the film-editor. Suffice to say I ducked the issue.

We drove back to the town, and parked the cars and the van in the square. As I climbed out of the car, the barmaid came out of the door of the pub.

'Mr. Mattinson!' she called. 'Mr. Mattinson, there's a call for you. Gentleman in London, he says he is.'

Beside me, Frank swore under his breath, then followed her into the saloon. Patrick climbed out of the other car, stretched his arms and yawned loudly, then ambled off towards the Gents. I went with Tina over to the riverside walk.

'I don't think I was very good,' I said.

'It doesn't matter. I didn't really want you involved with this anyway. Next week when we're cutting the film, I'll see if I can somehow lose the footage of you.'

'Make sure it's burnt, won't you?'

We watched an ore-carrier moving up the river towards the china-clay depot. It blew its siren three times, and we could hear the sound echoing off the low hills on either side of the river.

'Are you going to stay on here?' Tina said.

'I'll be in the village until the end of the week. What about you?'

'We've a couple more days yet.'

'Feel like a trip over on the ferry this evening?' I said, and she nodded.

Just then, Frank came hurrying out of the saloon.

'Pat? Where's Pat?'

'In the bog,' Ted said.

Patrick appeared, and at once Frank went over to him. 'They've re-scheduled us, Pat!'

'What?'

'The programme's been put back a week.'

'They can't do that!' Patrick said loudly. 'It's been fixed for months.'

'They've unfixed it,' said Frank. 'There's nothing we can do about it.'

'You're putting me on,' said Patrick.

Frank shook his head. 'I wouldn't joke about this, Pat.'

'Jesus Christ! I need a drink.'

He turned and walked into the bar, and Frank followed.

Beside me, Tina said: 'One week. That's awful.'

'So you've got a bit longer in which to shuffle your shots about,' I said.

'Don't you understand? It's the worst thing that could happen!'

'The best thing that could happen is that they postpone the thing indefinitely,' I said.

She smiled wanly. 'OK, you don't agree with the way Pat makes his films, but putting it back a week is a terrible thing to happen at this stage. We've almost finished shooting.'

'But it's only a week,' I said. 'The subject won't go cold.'

'Don't say you haven't heard of the Partiality Agreement?'

I stared at her blankly.

'It's the way television is programmed now,' she said. 'In the old days, everyone in television had to work to an unwritten code of impartiality. Well, they've dispensed with that now, because it was too much of a constraint. Everyone's got his own opinion, and it made the programmes very artificial if the man behind it had to bend over backwards to be fair. And people like politicians never believed that anyone could be unbiased anyway. So the television companies drew up the Partiality Agreement. Now everything that's broadcast is very right-wing and conservative one week; the following week, to maintain the balance, all the programmes are left-wing and radical. So you see—'

'So Pat's got to start from scratch!' I said.

'The whole film, all over again. He can't just give it a different emphasis . . . it'll mean interviewing a whole new batch of people.'

I smiled at her. 'I can't wait to see what he makes of it.'

'I'd better go and talk to him,' Tina said. 'He'll be taking it very badly. He doesn't like having to be radical.'

'I'll buy you a drink,' I said.

Inside the pub, Pat was sitting morosely at the bar drinking what appeared to be a tumblerful of whisky. He ignored us.

I ordered a couple of drinks for Tina and myself, and we waited to see what was going to happen.

At the far end of the bar, Frank was on the telephone.

Under the circumstances he looked remarkably optimistic.

'... Is Jeff there?' he was saying. '... Jeff, Frank here. Listen, we've got a problem. ... Oh, you've heard. I think we can handle it. ... Yes, but we've got to start all over. Look, I want you to fix a few things for me ... Yes, by tomorrow. Have you got some paper there? I want you to make a list. ... Right. I want a full breakdown on who is behind this entertainments complex, and what the vested interests are. The angle on that's going to be exploitation by labour, spread of capitalism, and that stuff. And see if you can get a spokesman from the National Trust to talk to us. ... Fine. And the usual statistics on pollution-levels. ... Yes, and a few more things. We'll be playing up the permissive stuff as usual, so get on to a model-agency and see if you can get half a dozen girls down here. Standard contract: nude bathing and orgy. OK? ... And we've found a sci-fi writer. Good value. See if you can turn something up on sci-fi. No one here knows what the hell he's talking about. ... Yes, and another thing ...'

I swallowed the rest of my drink.

'Count me out,' I said to Tina. 'I've done my bit for partiality.'

'Frank will be terribly disappointed,' she said.

'But I don't think Pat will mind. You'll be on the ferry tonight?'

At least she knew what the hell I was talking about.

'If Pat gets as drunk as I think he will,' she said, 'I'll be on it this afternoon.'

'Good.'

I hurried from the bar before Frank could finish his phone-call.

THREE COINS IN ENIGMATIC FOUNTAINS:

Carefully Observed Women
The Daffodil Returns the Smile
The Year of the Quiet Computer

THREE ENIGMAS: IV.

by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

Once again Brian Aldiss pushes wide magic casements for us to peer doubtfully upon a fevered landscape drenched with meanings, where, if we do not take care, our ocular vibrissi will almost certainly touch the cyclic stains that burn against a closing wall, where we shudder in terror at what the smile of the daffodil may reveal . . .

THREE COINS IN ENIGMATIC FOUNTAINS:
THREE ENIGMAS: IV

X CAREFULLY OBSERVED WOMEN

FROM my position, her bed looks like a ruined countryside, covered with a miserable dapple of fields. Occasionally, fields heave, rise to a great height above sea level, or sink from view, as Harrion stirs in her agony.

Much of the time, all I see of her is the old yellow of the roof of her mouth as she lies panting for breath. Sometimes, a great slack arm hangs down towards the floor, twisted and gritty like a stalactite in veined sandstone. Bits of her broken past come upon her; for days at a time, she labours among the fragments of a bygone year. She smells bad of nights, so that I lie as far from the bed as my chains will allow. I could have done better.

Outside I hear the splash of enigmatic fountains. Toy fish swim there, learning to devour each other.

Time streams by as always. Although now there is no one to check it at its source.

The women come to see Harrion. Some are her regular friends, like Bettron, Citrate, and old Ma Kandle, unable to give up a lifetime's habit of visiting. There are relations, like Mylene, Temple, Floret, Marriet, and the two aged sisters, Emilor and Chatelait, who are so fat they bump together as they walk, like buoys in a light swell. Neighbours appear, the blind Ma Audopar, little Pi, Cathwal, Eadie, Gaffrey with the port wine mark from next door. There are women with whom Harrion once quarrelled, now come to make their peace, sleek Perchince, Porly, and deaf Dame Caper. Many of these women are accompanied by their daughters.

When they come from a distance, some even bring their men. I know when men are chained up outside, can hear

them pulling restlessly at their rings or scuffling among each other. They do not enter the building. Only women and girls flock into the sick room, bringing little gifts with them, a flower or a carved stone. The shelves are full of needlework and knick-nacks, dolls and daffodils.

In comes Perchince, smart as ever, with a loose-woven shawl over her long costume, ushering in before her Scally, the dark-eyed daughter, whose elegant legs show a flaking of dark hair over the calves. Perchince brings a tiny prayer embroidered on green cloth and set about with artificial sea shells. She gives it to Harrion, whose arm comes up yellow and stringy to grasp it.

'You're looking better than when I last saw you, my dear. I'm sorry I've not been to see you for so long, but we've had so much trouble.'

'Recovery's only one stall in the market place,' says Harrion, speaking in her usual elusive and epigrammatic way.

Somewhere, Harrion finds the strength to pull herself up, wild-eyed and sweating, her lank fair hair raining down into the pits of her cheeks. Perchince helps adjust her pillows.

While Harrion fights for breath, Perchince tells her things she would like to know—how the price of fish has gone up, the scarcity of benjamins, the dangers of going out at night, the afflictions of her family, and the alarmingly high tides in Gobblestone.

To all this, Harrion listens after a fashion, her vacant and feverish eye rolling here and there. I watch her, but I also look at the visitors, Scally especially. Scally smells good and fresh. She has a small nose, wide dark-brown eyes, pleasant lips which sometimes purse together mischievously, and curly hair which clusters round her head in a lively way. I'd like to get her in my pad, I'd like to throw myself on her, I could eat her. She's getting fat.

She does not join in the conversation. She sits and is aware of my interest. She moved round slightly in her chair by the bedside, so that I can admire her knees. She opens her legs slightly, so that I can devour her thighs. She observes the effect of this on me.

Harrion interrupts the spate of Perchince's recital, saying, 'Scally is getting fat.'

'The trouble we have with her! We had just the same thing with her sister, seventy-five years ago. She's not fat, she's pregnant. Get up, Scally, show yourself.'

Scally rises and stands there indifferently.

'You naughty girl,' Harrion says. 'The taking of care never lost a friend yet. You've been in the ruins again, haven't you?'

Scally says nothing. I shake my chains but they take no notice.

'It'll be a cloud all the centuries of your life,' Harrion says, vaguely. 'And there's no repeal before the bar of your own conscience.'

'I don't feel guilty about it, Aunt Harrion, if that's what you mean,' says Scally defiantly, with a little flounce of her body that sets the saliva squirting in my gums.

'She's still very proud,' sleek Perchince says. 'That's the worst of it. And she would not confide in me until she was all of twenty-three months gone.'

'Independence is of no merit where tears are,' says Harrion.

'Still, we shall make the best of things and see her through her trouble.'

'Those who love their own creations too much fall into bondage,' Harrion replies, shifting her position and glancing pointedly at me. She wants me to see where the remark really applies.

Perchince arises, smiling frowningly at her daughter.

'We must go,' says she. 'I've got to take her to the calibrator's and have her oriented. Always more expense, Harrion.'

'Folly's three-quarters of circumstance,' Harrion agrees. 'Take care of yourself, and remember that compassion makes captives.' Again a mean glance at me.

Off goes Perchince, taking Scally with her. Scally looks cheerful. I miss it when her fresh smell no longer cuts the fats of the room.

Harrion dies a little more in the night and, next day, while

she drowns through the late afternoon, her cousin Temple appears. Temple's man, who is left outside, whines and scratches at the door. With her eyes still shut and one hand pressed to her fevered forehead, Harrion gives an account of what passed between her and Perchince on the previous day. She clutches her cousin's hand and elaborates their conversation endlessly, exhausted though she is.

'I'm sorry for Scally,' Temple says. I know she waits for her cousin to fall asleep; then she will occasionally slip over to me.

'It's all a mere dance of the ferret,' says Harrion. 'Scally is not really pregnant. She has a cushion under her clothes. They're just doing it for me, to distract me from the notion of dying. Anything, to keep my mind off that.'

'Oh, that would be wicked,' Temple says. 'Besides, you are not dying. You're getting better.'

'They no more deceive me than a bee a flower. Didn't my mother make me play the same trick on old Ma Bonnitruide seven or more centuries ago? She used to say to me, "Now that even God's fallen so low, we've each of us got to get out of life as best we can" '. As she speaks, she struggles into a sitting position and opens her weary eyes.

She sees then that Temple has one arm in a sling, and that blood-stained bandages cover her hand.

'What have you done with yourself?', she asks. And her cousin tells her a hair-raising story involving several coincidences, a rail journey, and a man who escaped from a travelling circus. Harrion tut-tuts all the way through the recital.

When Temple has gone, she says to the room in general, 'they don't fool me with their tales. I never forget about death. *I am* dying, aren't I?'

'You're dying,' I say. I can't help panting and looking eager.

She fixes me with a glowing stare. 'And you know what happens to you when I go . . .'

'You've often told me.'

'You'll be as solitary as a stone, just like you were when you started.'

She revives. I watch her heave herself upward, reaching for the prod, which is just long enough to touch me. I scramble to the end of my chain, but she will get me again if she does not fall dead first.

The last rays of sunset are red on the wall above the bed, like an old stain.

Time still streams by. The fountain plays. But there is nothing to do; nothing can be done.

I try to recall those happy seven days when I created the universe.

XI THE DAFFODIL RETURNS THE SMILE

NEECE and Reneece will drink no ichor from Moolab tonight, since he has to hunt and kill a *kimarsun*. He will need all his energy against the intense cold of the Rind and the might of those beings.

Neece and Reneece dress their warrior, singing to him as they do so, being careful to hold always to the old forms. Moolab stands between them in a trance, all his mailed hands extended and slowly vibrating. They saved the last of his sloughs against this occasion; the chitinous armours have been beaten with prescribed bronze mallets, and carefully lined with the ordained coatings of claysyrup and boccarrd-fleece. Now the females clamp on the armour.

Beyond their broodhaven, chirplings set up the agonizing Sun-Slayer chorus.

By the time he is prepared, at the prescribed hour, Moolab is in the warrior's trance. They are ready to leave. Both females pause at the door. They encompass his neck with their mailed jaws, tenderly kissing the scars there. Then they move into the tunnels of the Great Warren.

Through the haze of smoke and gas, they see the buildings all about them. They disregard them. They disregard the crowds.

'The Rind!' cry the crowds. 'Moolab goes to the colds of the Rind to slay one of the eternal *kimarsuns*! He will bring us the night as a present!'

Moolab glances neither to right nor to left. He heads straight for the Fate Gate of the city, where the Hive Lord awaits him.

The Hive Lord stands with the Arch Priest, a tremendous broadpsanned being, every one of whose eight legs bears a plutonium ring on every claw. At sight of him, Neece and Reneece fall behind, adopting the shrivel stance.

But Moolab approaches the Hive Lord with no decrease in pace, only stopping abruptly when nil-distance separates them. The two beings lock jaws, black clashing on black. That's over in a trice. Without hesitation, Moolab side-steps, offering his ocular vibrissi into the gaping mandibles of the Arch Priest. The pose is held to the count of ten, accompanied by a shrill chant from the sanctified chirplings. Then Moolab slides back one pace, to stay confronting the Priest as the other snaps shut his mandibles, otherwise remaining immobile.

'Do you, Moolab, accept your sacred duty to slay a *kimarsun* and render night to us?', demanded the Hive Lord in a singing tone.

'I accept my sacred duty and I will slay a *kimarsun* and render night to our kind until the purse is filled.'

Now the Arch Priest begins to speak in a singing tone. Each of his phrases, Moolab echoes after him. 'By the nine beggared cripples. By the fragrance of the Old Pursuer. By the cyclic stains that burn against a closing wall. By the fifteen hundred generations underground. By the scales of the mother and the leavings of the dreaded brood. By the colds and unmentionable voices that infest the Rind. By the spawn claw. By the things themselves. Above all, by the stars that blaze above the world, and the Wheel of Evil. Till ichor festers.'

Despite his clumsy caparisons, Moolab throws himself flat before the Priest.

'I will take notice of the hated constellations, of the Bat, the Devil Bull, the Boulder, the Night Worm and the Queen's Scar. This night shall see a report here of my death or my success. I will return with eye of *kimarsun* or my own eyes shall roll for ever down the crippled glaciers of the outside.'

'Take success with you, Moolab of the Core, bring back fire for our fire.'

The simple ritual is over. Lord and Priest both raise their prows high. Moolab rises and scuttles off at high speed through Fate Gate without a backward look. Whistling, the two brood-sisters, Neece and Reneece, rush after him, kicking dirt. The great gate slams behind them.

With unpausing ferocity, Moolab hurled himself forward, through the dreary and smouldering tunnels of the mantle. The brood-sisters gallop behind. Crevasses, molten rock, roof-falls—nothing can halt them. Moolab is going to slay a *kimarsun*.

Sometimes the tunnels divide. One way leads to the Rind, one to another hive. Kicking cinders, they gallop ever upwards.

At one junction, a Mother is crossing their path. She is in the huge serated softness of Metamorphosis I. At the sound of their terrible progress, the Mother turns, flicking her *sepia* head, opening her mandibles. She is unhesitatingly ready to fight.

Moolab tears into and through her soft body. He does not pause.

Following, Neece and Reneece plunge through the pulped remains, covering themselves with a viscid cream as they go. The still-chattering head of the Mother is flung aside by Reneece's shoulder as she passes.

They scent cooler parts of the world. The walls are more opaque. Movements about them have a duller grind. They know the world lives, just as they live.

Because of the increasing cold, the three beings move more slowly.

Moolab sniffs the terrible world ahead, where solids cease and emptiness comes down to the Rind. That is the region of the *kimarsunss*. He recites the Oath of Death or Success.

By the nine beggared cripples.

By the fragrance of the Old Pursuer.

By the cyclic stains that burn against a closing wall.

By the fifteen hundred generations underground.

By the scales of the mother and the leavings of the dreaded brood.

By the colds and unmentionable voices that fill the Rind . . .

They come up to a trapdoor. Without pausing in his stride, Moolab goes at it full tilt, stopping dead with his occular vibrissi almost touching the solid stone.

He moves forward slowly. He presses himself against the stone. He heaves. Hind pairs of legs drum in the tunnel for additional purchase. The stone rolls aside.

Moolab climbs out on to the Rind, beneath the awful emptiness. The brood-sisters follow, bellies flat to the ground. The antennae swivel in dread.

They feel the colds, hear the unmentionable voices.

Overhead, the Wheel of Evil grinds.

The warrior Moolab feels the living Rind beneath him. He clings to the great carcass with all claws, knowing that this body now forms part of the division between Good and Evil. Below is all Good—the farther below, the more good, until the deep hives are reached, nestled forever among the greatest good. Above is all Evil—the farther above the greater evil until the high stars are reached.

He fixes his multiplex vision now upon the high stars. He must reach the place of the *kimarsunss*. To get there, he must use the directions pointed by the high stars; in this way, Evil is used for Good; that is part of the pattern.

Above him in the emptiness, he makes out the constellations, the Bat, the Devil Bull, the Boulder, the Night Worm, the queen's Scar, and others.

The Night Worm is in the ascendant. Its hated length spirals up from horizon to zenith, marked by stars whose names Moolab recites to himself: Boylat, Crabarty, Proshing, Hrozne, Ramarkkan. Ramarkkan burns in the fangs of the mouth of the Night Worm. It is a baleful orange star.

And Moolab knows it threatens his life. He sees that it is tonight's enemy.

He uses Ramarkkan to betray itself. Taking it as a bearing, he sets off in the direction of the plateau where the *kimarsunss* are.

Neece and Reneece are left behind. They stay by the trap. They will die if he does not return. They will never move again if he does not return. Their bodies will be possessed by the *kimarsunss* and the high stars, and they will stride the empty plains of the Rind on rear legs whenever Ramarkkan rises in the clotted west.

Moolab travels in an intense wave motion best suited to the undulating terrain. He is without fear. In him live the fifteen hundred generations underground.

The ground slopes upward in an antique and unbroken geometry, its euclidean symmetries taking it towards the pleateau of the mighty *kimarsunss*. Nothing changes. Even the light that falls becomes permanent with time.

When everything withers, the stones retain their life.

He flows over the step separating the incline from the plateau. He stops.

Here are the monstrous creatures. The radiance of the high stars falls on the sine curves of their flanks. Their shoulders are dwarfed by distance. Their skulls are light-houses, blinking from a far headland. Their colossal size makes them abstract. The night upon their carcasses makes them legendary.

Low rumblings of hatred start somewhere amid the joints of Moolab's abdomen and work forward towards his thorax. He channels the rumbling through his glands, so that its help ferments the poisons he will soon need. He rejoices to feel his own chemistries at work, knowing their cyclic stains will aid him against evil. Until they are ready, he waits.

As he waits, he observes the monstrous *kimarsunss*. They have stayed on this starlit plateau for ever. Although Moolab has never been here before, he has a folk-memory of the beings. He knows their very positions on the plateau. None of them have ever moved.

When the season comes about in the core, when the axis grinds round on the impulse, when the desire falls on the hive, then comes the Swarming. Then the hives go forth, breaking through the Rind, soaring aloft in the emptiness between Good and Evil. The Swarming flies over the plateau of the *kimarsunss* and those that survive will recall the

dispositions of the enemy. But most will fall, dying, their wings bursting into flame as they plunge down to dust. One *kimarsun* can bring about twenty thousand deaths.

Moolab will revenge the deaths. As he waits, he turns some eyes again at the high stars. The Mottled Egg, the Queen's Scar, they are to his left shoulder. The Night Worm still burns overhead, the orange tooth of Ramarkkan still flaring in the fanged mouth.

The stars, revolving on the great Wheel of Evil, have more motion than their guards down below. No Swarming has ever reported the movement of a single *kimarsun*. Moolab sees that they are still with an immeasurable stillness.

That terrible immobility is because the *kimarsunss* work on a different time scale to the rest of the living things in the universe. For there is no doubt that the *kimarsunss* are alive. They can be killed.

Occasionally, dull internal glowing overtakes one of the colossi. Moolab is fortunate. As he waits for his chemistries to become effective, he sees that one of the more distant *kimarsunss* is undergoing this colour-change.

To the oblique concave surfaces of the colossus comes a dull crimson flush. It travels like a wave across the bulk of the being, over the abstractions which serve for limbs, abdomen, shoulders. The wave is like a signal of anger. Anger is communicated to Moolab; he raises his belly from the ground and flexes his rear segments over his head, preparing to charge.

The eyes of the *kimarsunss* watch him. They will turn him to stone if he entertains a moment's doubt. Doubt is defeat in a moral war.

The flushing colossus is now a dull red all over, but the colour seems to fade slightly. Then, a sudden shock. The creature emits a helium flash. The blaze of white light extends all over its bulk, bursts outwards, illuminating the plateau for an instant.

The flash serves as a signal to Moolab. He waits no more, but launches himself savagely across the powdered plain. He hits top speed, his multitudinous feet pulverizing ground as he runs between the living mountains. The noise of his pro-

gress is such that it wakens echoes among the surrounding canyons of rib and flank. Avalanches of stardust roll down the ancient sides of the nearest *kimarsunss*.

But Moolab does not see. He directs all his vision at the target ahead, which appears to swell monstrously as he approaches, eclipsing the Twin Cinders, the Queen's Scar. It is still undergoing colour-change. Now a dusky red expands over its surface again, lit from inside with shots of brighter colour. The sight would be terrifying, petrifying, if Moolab did not close his mind with incantation.

Now it's near. He goes in for the kill. His antennae vibrate, his maxillae sweep back, his poisoned mandibles open wide. He directs his travelling bulk at one grotesque corner of the *kimarsun*. The sound of his charge is left to rattle far behind him. Noiseless, he bears in towards the motionless foot, the heel. Jaws wider still. He bites.

Without pause, he plunges on, bearing away with him part of the substance of the colossus. Then he halts, turning right around in one moment. The great clatter of his charge sweeps about him and is gone.

Silence falls.

The high stars shine.

The *kimarsun* begins to shed matter as Moolab's poisons take effect. It seems to grow, become unstable. Bits fall off it and die into the plateau. An eye tumbles down, to lie there, glowing and white. The whole process is pitiful, insignificant. In a few moments, there is nothing left but a little white eye. Evil is defeated. Good has triumphed.

Moolab goes back and picks up the eye. He will take it to the High Priest.

He is almost too tired to feel the stir of victory. But he looks up through the unmentionable piles of emptiness to the great revolving Wheel of Evil.

There he sees the high stars comprising the Night Worm. The Night Worm's hated length still spirals up from horizon to zenith. Boylat, Crabarty, Prosshing, Hrozne, still burn. But Ramarkkan no longer blazes in the Worm's fanged mouth. Ramarkkan has gone out.

In time, the forces of Good will eradicate all the high stars. The hive will possess everything.

XII THE YEAR OF THE QUIET COMPUTER

WHISPERS of a faint boutique and the band playing its own tune, endlessly, on and on. Every now and then, someone takes a musician out to the beds of daffodils, brings him to orgasm, garottes him, and buries him among the spring flowers. The ground is wonderfully warm for the time of year.

Toy fish swim in enigmatic fountains. They are learning to devour each other.

Alphonse Didcot reclines on a self-invented chair, reading some tales from the quiet computer. He has his own music. The magic word Cathay hangs in shades of T'ang gold over the food-divider. And his great-great-grandfather, five foot two and the best potter of his day, smiles down mummified from above the fireplace; the teeth are rather yellow now, but the gums still shine with a redeeming blue.

Outside the tall flanks of the tower, the ceremony of Fluctuating Lanterns is still in progress. Children flounce in long lean grass.

'We will bear them away, we will bear them away. Transience will be banished, banished to the eternal hills,' chant the little holy orphans. Surely enough, the mists roll in about the gaunt building.

'Let us move to Gorica 57901,' Alphonse says. Already, he can feel the start of the multiple births. The great-great-grandfather nods, its backbone creaking comfortably, like a familiar board in a family house.

One man walking sniffs the familiar flavours of the sky. Despite the lanterns, the trains are still coming in, burrowing through inter-stellar gas in a fury of speed; their great broad firemen bend their backs, shovelling in the helium-coal. Some engines are black, some red. In their rattling trucks, they bear the last of the stars to the depot.

Betelgeuse, Procyon, Aldebaran, poor Vega, lying on its side. Already, the wreckers wait in the yard.

When the whistle blows, Alphonse is ready. He pulls back the heavy curtains. From the outside of the windows, things fall away, crying, crying. The mist is all about. Some trees appear, stifled by the mist, entangling it in their unkempt gestures. The musicians have all been finished now.

The mist clears. Gone is the old clutter of habitation, with its lockers and appearances. Instead, the castle stands on a flat unclothed plain. It stretches away into all distances. Only to one side stand the mountains. The mountains stand aloof. Strange lights of sunrises and sunsets, interplaying, confuse their contours. Something skips from peak to peak, looking for destiny.

Alphonse takes up a daffodil and smiles. The daffodil returns the smile.

THE PHOBOS TRANSCRIPTS

by

CHERRY WILDER

The dispossessed of this Earth yearn for a home. If an intelligent entity were dispossessed of a body as well as a planet would not the yearning for communication with old friends, the personal awareness of another mind, become intolerable? No one knows what space holds for the future. The exploration of space has often been likened to the exploration of the seas, and many and wonderful were the tall tales brought back from the far oceans. Even from so close a fellow world in the ocean of space as Mars, and his satellite Phobos, this tall tale would be looked at with scepticism by the official mind – and with credence enough to take comfort from the thought of a covenant.

THE PHOBOS TRANSCRIPTS

Quentin D. Thomas, MD., DSM., PhD (Columbia)
Director of Psychological Testing and Studies,
Sheppard Rehabilitation Centre,
Department of Space Medicine,
Houston, Texas

to

Air Commodore Margaret A. Voss, MA (Princeton)
Assistant Director of Public Relations,
United States Space Service,
Washington, DC.

... You'll find my reports on the file, Margot, but I want to make a few of the more important points over again in this covering letter. There has been too damned much speculation and gossip in the service about the so-called 'Phobos transcripts'. Before long ... certainly when Morris receives his medical discharge ... the public will get hold of the story.

I am enclosing copies of all the relevant statements and tests in this file, including recent film of the site, taken by a local reconnaissance team from Marsport, and a strip of video tape showing the alleged fight. I'd like to make two things quite clear: I consider the whole experience as detailed by Erikson and Morris entirely subjective and hallucinatory triggered off by the delirious outbursts of Gale. Secondly: there is no question of conscious deception on the part of John Gale. There is nothing in the three short speeches transcribed from tape that could not emanate from the mind of a young space crewman, nourished I'm sure on Sci-Fi cassettes and even books.

There is no need to postulate for one moment an 'alien' intelligence. Cases come to mind from last century: Bridie

Murphy, not to mention the lad on the 'Jet-Propelled Couch.' Most striking of all is the resemblance to the Elvira Wyatt humbug of the nineties. The only remarkable thing about the Phobos transcripts is that they were obtained under service conditions on a satellite . . . if three farmers in Arkansas had told the same story they'd be laughed out of court!

You must also consider that these men, along with the twelve service personnel on the mothership, were under 'stress of time and distance' . . . a space probe of eighteen months.

In Gale's monologues notice the lofty tone, the archaic, not to say biblical turn of phrase, the latin base for the proper nouns. Certainly the young man's mind has hidden depths; we need look no further than his personal background. His father, G. H. B. Gale, is an emeritus professor of Anthropology, living in Perth, Western Australia; his mother writes verse. The actual transcription from tape was done first by John Gale, then independently by myself . . . the spelling of 'alien' names was the same.

TRICLAMADAN to the lost entities of the Four Worlds, Greeting! This is a crude and practical tongue not more than two thousand years old. It is rich in metaphor . . . I speak a tongue, I speak with a tongue, a differentiated fleshy member, strung in the mouthpiece of this skull. I have encountered this speech and others like it several times since their inception. The brain size of this species has not altered but the physique has improved and the technology has, I admit, grown up like grass. In many respects they resemble the Moruia of Torin but the Moruia are more innocent. The Men of Earth have music to their credit and number and some simple systems of communication.

Last time I greeted you, my friends, it was in the great reading 6,700 degrees, in the galactic reading Amfur to the seventh; it was 169 degrees 46 minutes below the apex of the orbit of an un-named planet . . . un-named by us, these cautious travellers call it Uranus. I am shuttling about, as you perceive, in and out of this distant galaxy. I do not know when I will have a voice again. But time is our special treas-

ure, our ocean, our tide, our solace, our perpetual meditation, and I am content in time to take what time brings to me. I am Triclamadan; waking I speak; I recall, I bear in me the marvellous certainties, the lights and sounds of the Four Worlds. Message discontinued but not ended.

In the moment before the thrust roared Morris sat forward, straining at his seat belt.

'Hear that?' he said.

Erikson listened but he could hear nothing unusual: nothing loose, no channels open; then as he picked up a faint trace of sound the rockets roared. Both men were set back into their recliner chairs. He shouted to Morris through his chest mike

'What did you hear?'

Morris shouted back

'Nothing . . . some kind of vibration, maybe.'

The shuttle grated on rock and bumped, with the broken strut taking hold. The emergency landing was a hazardous procedure in such a light craft but both men were experienced. They had been in each other's company for eighteen months, crew members of a distance probe.

Theta Nebraska swung in space like a loose blimp not more than 5000 kilometres away; all systems going, going gone. The rest of the crew were waiting, suited up, as the residual air grew thinner. Erikson and Morris were on a rescue mission, taking the shuttle into Marsport. They had other freight: John Gale, the youngest crew member, measuring his stuporous length in the cramped shuttle cabin. Slight concussion and a broken collar-bone.

Erikson thought of the boy and loosened his straps.

'Might have been Johnny talking.' He said.

'I'll take a look.' said Morris.

Erikson was already working his way aft.

'Wait!' said Morris. 'He'll keep, won't he?'

Erikson didn't like Morris. He had worked with him closely and well on the probe mission but he still couldn't stand the guy and remarks like that had something to do with it.

'The kid is in bad shape,' he said.

'So are we!' snapped Morris. 'Take a look. Have you got out of position on this goddamned hunk of rock?'

'Phobos,' said Erikson.

He brought up their position on the console and opened the scanner. Outside it was dark as crude oil; the beam from the scanner showed a patch of grey sand, a rock, another rock . . .

'They had a mess of satellite retrieval gear about four kilometres south . . .' said Erikson. 'Place ain't much bigger than a satellite itself.'

Morris was jumpy. 'If we can't make contact with Marsport we'll rot here.'

'We'll make contact.'

'Some rescue mission . . .' Morris peered into the oily darkness. 'Why the hell did we have to draw shuttle duty!'

'Quit griping!' growled Erikson. 'Start checking for that fuel blockage. I'll see to Johnny.'

Morris ran a hand over his forehead and over the bristles of his crewcut in a gesture that Erikson had seen a hundred times. He choked down his unreasoning dislike of the man; Morris worked well, he was a first-class maintenance engineer even if he beefed all the time. Erikson edged past the grey hump of the ISS housing and slid open the cabin door.

Johnny was quiet. Erikson felt a surge of helpless anxiety when he saw the kid flat out on the steel cot but he told himself firmly that Johnny would make it. There was a fairly heavy routine sedation for shock that held him comatose. Liz Marshall, the MO, had sent Johnny on the shuttle to avoid foul air, but the real danger was still shock. 'Relatively minor injuries sustained during distant service,' whispered the manual, 'may result in death from delayed shock . . .' Erikson himself had seen a Lieutenant Navigator on one of the Russian ships die at his console in minutes three weeks after he suffered a broken wrist.

John Gale's colour seemed better, his breathing more normal in the clear air of the shuttle. His right arm and shoulder were in a cast in a sling and now Erikson saw that he

had freed his left hand from the restraining straps on the cot. His fingers rested easily on the communication panel as if he had been calling them on the intercom. Strange lights winked from the panel; Johnny's fumbling fingers had locked into a weird range of frequencies, plus voice transmission and record. Erikson smiled as he switched off.

Yet the idea of a sick man talking at random to the depths of space made him queasy. Erikson squeezed his eyes shut for a second: this was no time to show strain; Trant and Liz and the others were waiting back there . . . he had to complete the mission. He flexed his muscles and stared around at the tiny cabin, looking for comfort, for hope where there was none, only the walls of regulation aqua. He saw that Johnny had opened his eyes.

'Hey there!' he said cheerily. 'Johnny?'

Johnny was not himself, Erikson could see that, but his eyes were alert.

'Where?' the whisper was clear.

'In the shuttle, man . . .' explained Erikson. 'We're taking you in to Marsport.'

'What do you call this place?' Johnny stared fixedly at Erikson.

'Phobos.' Erikson admitted. He filled him in a little about *Theta*, the rescue mission, and added: 'So we're down on Phobos, one of the moons, with a fuel link problem.'

'Is that a Greek word?'

'What? Oh sure. Phobos is a Greek word, I guess.'

'What fuel does this craft use?'

'Lithium!' replied Erikson, surprised. Johnny had certainly drawn a blank with the fall and the sedation.

Then his suit speaker crackled and the voice of Morris whispered urgently:

'Erikson? Paul? Get back in here, will ya . . .'

'Coming.'

Erikson was not sure Gale should be left alone. The kid was staring around the cabin, taking everything in as if he were seeing it for the first time.

'Take it easy,' said Erikson. 'Liz ordered more medication for 15.30 hours. Do you have any pain?'

'Pain?' Johnny considered. 'Yes. No. Discomfort would describe it better.'

Another screwy answer.

'Hang in there ...' said Erikson, lamely. 'I'll be back.' Johnny closed his eyes and lay still. His left hand moved through a tentative five-finger exercise on his chest. Erikson had the insane idea that Johnny was faking somehow, playing possum. The moment he was out of the cabin that hand would move across and lock into that curious range of frequencies ...

Erikson shook his head to drive away the absurd image—this emergency was affecting him more than he realized. There was a time, he told himself ruefully, when he was convinced that Morris was some kind of a psycho. He went forward.

'How's the kid?' asked Morris.

'Spooky!' said Erikson.

'What?'

Morris was tense and irritable. He had been checking the fuel system and now he was moving the scanner slowly across their landing area.

Erikson slid into his seat and activated all his broadcast channels.

'Did you find the trouble?'

He was about to give the call to Marsport when the interior of the control room was plunged into darkness. It took him a second to realize that Morris had thrown the switches.

'What the hell ...?'

'Ssh!'

Morris was straining across the panel as if he wanted to press his nose against the forward plexiglass. The beam of the scanner inched over rocks and sand.

'What are you playing at?' growled Erikson.

Morris said in a shaking voice:

'There is something out there.'

'What ...?'

Erikson didn't believe it; but the desolation of the place

was working on him. He didn't need Morris's horrified explanation:

'Something that moves, Paul. Some creature. Something alive.'

They stared in silence at their own beam of light. The blackness that lay beyond it was impenetrable.

'It's not possible!' said Erikson. 'That's a lunar surface out there. Airless. About the size of the Pentagon but moving a helluva lot faster. You called it a hunk of rock, Glen!'

'I saw something ...' whispered Morris. 'A shadow. Something. I know it's out there.'

Erikson began to feel a twinge of sympathy for the man. They were all past breaking point ... why not admit it?

'Hey now ...' he said. 'Take it easy. We have to make Marsport, remember.'

'You don't believe me!'

Erikson did not reply directly. He switched on the console lights and began working on his transmitting bands again. He left the cabin dark so Morris could keep an eye open for his 'creature'.

He gave the call signal to Marsport and the whole range of space distress calls. He switched in all his frequencies in turn; he called every place in the Universe; he called Armstrong Base and Houston and the Pentagon and Greenwich and Woomera and Khabarovsk. He called SOS and Mayday. He spoke, bleeped, pulsed whistled, echoed, pinged and wowed for twenty minutes: part of the time he listened, desperately fading the static.

Space was a noisy place; there was nothing dead about it. There seemed to be eddies of sound close by, right in the corner of his ear. Once he snatched off the head-set ready to tell Morris to shut up, but Morris was not saying a word.

O Enclata, Thorss and Marilurian, old time companions, friends of the Four Worlds, lost and most dear, closest, indivisible, hear again the voice of Triclamadan, the wanderer, who knows not day or night but only star space, exile, the deeps of time. Assure me in turn of the perfection of our

choice the beauty of our equations. I am embodied. I am impressed, borne in upon all sides, walled in flesh. Yet it is workable and the nervous system highly developed. This fellow must bear with my indulgence; at worst he will be left with a sense too many.

I begin to feel in the tips of these fingers the sense of my former incarnations. And I recall that furthest time, time of first youth. Look back, Triclamadan, along these endless spirals to the helix blossom beside the lake; thin darkness of the equinoctial dawn; warmth of the air. O lost, O Marilurian, Daughter of Light . . .'

Erikson let out his breath sharply, slid the quivering needle of light back across the dial and locked on to the wavering signal. It came again; letters grouped in the print-out slot; there was no doubt about it.

'Marsport,' he said. 'Glen, we have Marsport.' Morris reacted cautiously. They bent over the print-out like doctors monitoring a renewed heartbeat. Then with smooth precision Erikson took the frequency and repeated his brief distress call. Marsport answered again, still using international code.

'What about it?' whispered Erikson. 'I might try voice contact. It's really no distance. A transatlantic call.'

'No!' Morris gripped his arm. 'You could lose them. Use code.'

'Maybe you're right.'

Erikson was already sending the expanded distress call. Position of *Theta*, nature of the emergency. Marsport responded after a longer interval. Erikson reckoned there was an operator on the other end by this time; space distress calls weren't handled automatically after the first few seconds. The guy in Marsport was undoubtedly trying voice contact and wondering what in hell was going on . . . the discrepancy in distance would have him puzzled. He continued to send: 'SDPUS-T1074, *Theta Nebraska*, all systems failing. *Theta* shuttle grounded Phobos. Assist mothership soonest.' He gave the bearings of *Theta* for the fourth or was it the fifth time, and then their own. Marsport replied

bluntly 'Wilco', then creaked into a long repetition of the ship's bearings.

Erikson felt dizzy with relief; he sagged in his chair.

'That's it!' he said. 'We got through. Glen, old buddy, we got through! You heard the man . . . Wilco. Most beautiful non-word in the language!'

'Quiet!' said Morris. 'You think I'm crazy? Well, you're acting crazy yourself. You don't believe a thing I've told you. We have an alien out there. Some creature. I saw something.'

'Again?' said Erikson, warily. 'Where?'

Morris pointed to a shadowy corner between two rocks and for a moment Erikson's heart thumped. A movement? Then he shook his head; it had been the reflection of his own shoulder in the plexiglass.

'No,' he said. 'I can't buy it, Glen. You're jumping at shadows. Relax, man! We can call the ship now . . . tell 'em help is on the way.'

Morris passed a hand over his face; he brought up the lights again.

'Okay, sure,' he said. 'Sorry, Paul!'

'How's the fuel linkage coming?'

'Fine. It was simple . . . coupla gas bubbles.'

'That's great!' Erikson was ashamed to have doubted Morris; he wondered if he had been riding the poor guy too hard.

'Before you call the ship,' continued Morris, 'help me do one thing. Help me through the lock. I have to check the exterior fuel coupling.'

'You're going out there?'

'I have to make this one check.'

'Okay,' said Erikson. 'Take a look at the damaged strut while you're out. I'm doubtful if it will retract when we move this barge out.'

He watched Morris going through the exit procedures with some sort of admiration. No doubt about it the man had guts. He insisted on going out on to the lunar surface just as strongly as he had insisted that there was a creature out there. Was the man testing his own delusion? He spun

the taps on the lock and Morris, suited up, crawled into the pressure chamber. Presently there came the unmistakable resonance of the hatchway.

Erikson turned to the scanner and watched Morris descending the ladder with traditionally small and weighty steps.

'Glen?' he tuned in.

'This is really something, Paul!' exclaimed Morris. 'Like a ride on a ferris wheel. Mars is near enough to touch.'

'Temperature?'

'Rising,' said Morris. 'You should come out here Paul.' He was out of range of the scanner; Erikson could see one silver boot hard up against the base of the ladder.

'Glen,' he said. 'it's 15.30. I have to give Johnny his medication.'

'I'm fine.' Morris came into view again. 'Go ahead Paul. This place is deserted, like you said.'

'Do you have good visibility?'

'Sure. Dawn light. You should come and see for yourself.'

Erikson made his way back to the cabin and found Johnny wide awake. His colour was normal and he struggled to sit up, but his smile was not working too well.

'Cheer up!' said Erikson. 'All systems go. And stop bouncing around . . . Doc Marshall's orders.'

'You communicated with Marsport?'

'We raised 'em!' said Erikson happily, counting out capsules. 'Here . . . this one is for the pain, I guess. These are antibiotic and the green one is the stabilizer.'

'The man called Glen Morris . . .'

Johnny's voice had hardened and deepened.

'Morris is along . . .' soothed Erikson. 'He's doing a walk, checking a couple of things.'

'He is insane!'

The tones of the voice were so strange that the hackles began to stir on the back of Erikson's neck.

'Johnny?'

'Glen Morris is insane. He is planning to kill you.'

'Aw, come on!' shouted Erikson in sheer exasperation. 'Who's crazy around here? I reckon Phobos has spooked every man on this shuttle!'

'You may be right.'

Erikson went to the locker where the rations were kept and sucked down a whole pack of orange concentrate with supavite.

'Johnny,' he said, gently, 'you're a sick man.' The answer was equally gentle:

'I'm trying to help you, Paul Erikson.'

Erikson stared at Johnny Gale.

'Against my better judgment.'

Johnny lay still on the cot and the words rolled out of his mouth.

'This man has remarkable powers of recovery and the drugs you gave him are already taking effect. Neither he nor I feel any pain or even the discomfort I mentioned earlier.'

'*This* man . . .?' Erikson sat down.

'John Gale.'

'Johnny . . . please. Take it easy, man!'

'I am not a man.'

'You're sure as hell not a woman!' cracked Erikson feebly.

'Semantics! I am not human.'

Erikson spread his hand and gave a helpless laugh.

'What can I say? You're confused in your mind!'

'His mind!'

'Okay,' said Erikson. 'I'll buy it. Who are you?'

'It is difficult to tell you.'

There was a dull sound directly under Erikson's feet and he jumped. Someone, something *outside* had bumped or scraped the hull of the shuttle.

'Jesus . . .' exclaimed Erikson. 'If that's Morris what is he playing at?'

He dived out of the cabin and Johnny's voice, his new voice, came after him.

'Take care . . . Take great care . . .'

Erikson reached the scanner; the light was brighter now,

an echo of the magnificent Martian dawn: amber and deep rose. There was no sign of Morris . . . but wait!

Erikson bent closer. In the foreground were a series of small objects, black against the buff coloured rock. Erikson enlarged the picture . . . yes, a spanner, a Yamada tension tool; the contents of Glen Morris's tool kit lay scattered on the surface of Phobos.

'Glen? Glen?'

Erikson scanned steadily through the whole ninety degree field.

'I have no visual, Glen. Get in the field, Glen . . .' He suddenly hated the sound of his own voice, pleading and frightened. He scanned in silence. Even the red light of dawn left shadows, places in the rock big enough to hide . . . what? An alien, a man's body, something bigger than a breadbox. 'I have to go out there,' thought Erikson, 'and I'm scared.'

He reached out and for the first time since the emergency landing he called the mothership. Who would be on duty? Tracy maybe, or the Skipper . . . probably not Liz. After a long four minutes there came a weak and flickering burst of the old international code. He spoke and was acknowledged. They could hear his voice.

'Help coming.' He said. 'Marsport alert. Hang on you guys.'

And the best answer was tapped out feebly over the gulfs of space: 'Do our best'. Erikson swallowed hard and recognized the symptom. He was choking with compassion and grief, with mother-to-child anxiety for the human beings on the dark ship, saving their breath. His duty was to lift morale, not to be comforted.

'We're all fine. Johnny is in good hands.' he said. 'Repeating . . . Help summoned 5.13, *Theta* time. Acknowledge.' For acknowledgment there was only a fading identification ' . . . *Theta* . . .'; then Erikson was alone again.

He turned back to the scanner and ran through the empty field. He changed the setting and to his surprise the arc cleared the horizon and showed beyond it, unbelievably close, the bulk of Mars. He pushed on through the space walk routine, full of bleak anxiety. What conditions did pre-

vail out there on this lunar lollipop? Had Morris fallen off the edge? Was there some gravitational hang-up on a satellite this small? He set everything on automatic, activated the lock, checked his tank and felt the rim of his helmet suck into place as the vacuum strips took hold. He stepped into the pressure chamber and worked awkwardly by the headlight of his suit. He set the time for thirty minutes and stepped out of the hatchway into the hot brilliance of the dawn.

There were five steps on the ladder and the bottom step was a long one. Erikson came out ungracefully, butt first, clinging to the handgrips: one step. Jesus but it was a weird little dishpan of a satellite, rainbow coloured through his visor, with the perpetual bulk of the planet swimming above and below, wherever he looked. Two steps. He could almost see under the shuttle, the area he wanted to examine most. He had an idea in his head that Morris had gone there to fix the strut . . . out of range of the scanner.

Erikson saw that part of the ground was clear in the ruby shadow of the hull. Then he glanced upwards at the hatchway and saw the black lens of the camera swivelling down. His descent was being recorded on video. The inside control? No, it was not activated. That left the remote control unit . . . Morris must have it. But that was crazy! Had he been going out to film his 'creature'? It didn't seem like a good reason for filming Erikson. He placed one leaden boot then another on the third step and it sliced neatly into three pieces beneath his weight.

He hung and kicked for a lower step but his weighted feet swung in awkwardly under the hull. He went sprawling backwards as the steps slewed and buckled. Erikson began falling a long, slow way down to the hard ground of Phobos and twisted desperately to save his tanks, his life, his air-supply, from contact with the rock. The dawn flared up around him but he grounded firmly without losing consciousness. No damage done? His right arm and shoulder ached; he guessed they were badly bruised. Before he could begin to heave himself up he saw Morris, a pair of heavy silver boots, edging out from under the shuttle.

Erikson could not get his right arm from under his body;

with numb fingers inside his unyielding glove he fumbled for the dials of the communication system on his chest.

'Lie still. Watch what he does.'

The voice was intense and soft, so close that it could have been the crackle of his suit fabric or the creation of his brain. Yet Erikson lay still.

He could see Morris full length now, plodding the few steps with that comically deliberate gait to where Erikson lay. Morris held some object in his gloved hands. He swung towards the shuttle and then towards Erikson as if measuring the distance of his partner from the steps. Light bounced from the object he carried; Erikson identified it with a surge of doubt. An anodized unit about the size of a ration tube: the remote control for the video camera. Morris was getting him in focus.

Erikson found the right spot on the dial.

'It's okay, Glen . . .' he panted. 'One step gave out.' Morris replied in a voice that was normal but not reassuring.

'Stay where you are, Paul. I'm coming.'

Erikson was having trouble finding his feet. The voice came in again, sure as static.

'Move now! Get moving, Erikson!'

Erikson struggled, bounced sideways like a ball, trying to bend his knees and get his boots back on the ground. Morris growled:

'Where the hell are you heading, Paul?'

He put the remote control unit in the kangaroo pocket of his suit and came after Erikson. He overstepped, which was easy, and came right up to Erikson, who caught his arm for support. He could see Morris's face quite clearly through the visor of his helmet; but it told him nothing. Morris took hold of Erikson's left arm with both mitts and began to urge him along.

He pushed Erikson towards the shuttle, then still in an eerie radio silence, put out one hand and began feeling for the connecting tubes from Erikson's tanks.

'He means to kill you!' The voice was insistent and at last Erikson admitted to himself whose voice it was. 'Save yourself, Paul Erikson!'

'Johnny!' called Erikson and Morris heard him.

'What about Johnny?' Morris was fierce, ingratiating. 'Get back there, Paul. Get back over there.'

Erikson pushed Morris's hand away instinctively and found his feet at last.

'Glen ... quit shoving ...' he said feebly. 'My arm hurts.'

Morris came after him, arms outspread, in a slow dancing movement.

'Are you hurt, Paul?' he asked innocently. 'Your tank is fouled. Let me ...'

'No!' said Erikson, all his trust ebbing away. 'Fix the steps. Get inside.'

'Johnny's lying!' said Morris, out of the blue. 'He doesn't know what he's saying.'

'Are you disabled?'

'My arm ... bruised I guess.' said Erikson. The pain was sharper now that the numbness from the fall was wearing off. 'Johnny, is that you?'

'Not exactly,' murmured the voice.

'What wavelength have you?' asked Erikson.

'Yours.'

Morris was coming after him again, uphill. The ground was striated in rainbow patterns under their feet.

'Come back!' he demanded. 'Where are you going, Erikson?'

'I don't need any help.' said Erikson. 'Get the steps straight. I can make it ...'

'No baby ...' breathed Morris. 'No baby ... I'm gonna see you choke to death. I'm gonna have that helmet off!'

'What are you saying, Glen!' Erikson shouted and deafened himself.

'Choke!' said Morris. 'Suffocate. Maybe your skull will implode like a video screen. Right here where the camera is watching. Camera can't lie, Paul old buddy ...'

Erikson stood still and Morris lunged at him.

'Are you convinced?' asked the voice in Erikson's head.

'Yes!' said Erikson wildly. 'Yes! Help me! Johnny?'

'Johnny can't help you ...' crooned Morris. 'I already took care of him once. Come to poppa ...'

He caught Erikson around the knees in a flying tackle of seven metres and they went rolling down in another crazy almost weightless fall. Erikson spun to his left, burying his sound arm up to the elbow in a drift of sand that spun up around the pair of them in a glittering cloud. It was hot; he could feel the warmth through his silversuit. He tried to balance on one hip and scoop the sand at Morris. But Morris was crowding over him, with his gauntlets hooked like metal claws, aiming for the tubes on Erikson's back. The blur of sound inside Erikson's helmet was his own voice crying out in fear.

The flash of light was blinding. Erikson felt it flare up around them as they fought and wash over their bodies. Both men spun slowly apart and turned towards the light. Erikson's first thoughts were of an explosion aboard the shuttle but he felt no shock wave. The shuttle was intact; it stood out, glowing faintly, against the tawny rocks. Then, as he watched, a source of light inside the craft began to grow brighter. The radiance spread in waves and curtains of cool, vigorous light. The outlines of the shuttle's casing faded or became translucent, while the marvellous light grew and pulsed.

Erikson felt better. His bruised arm was no longer painful; the efforts of the fight, the ordinary tension of a moon-walk, all were eased. His brain felt clear and alert; he knew that the light was operating upon him: his sense of well-being tinged with awe was a property of the light. He turned towards Morris. His partner had bent forward against a rock in a clumsy approximation of a kneeling position. Broken whispers came through Erikson's intercom. Morris was praying.

Then in the midst of the light flowing out from the shuttle Erikson made out a human form, standing upright. Gale . . . it must be Johnny Gale, transfigured. The thought of a human being, the young crewman he knew, possessed by a being, an intelligence so powerful, even if it were ben-
evolent, sobered him a little.

"Who are you?" Erikson demanded.

And the answer came in Gale's voice, as it had warned

him, tied in some strange way to his own intercom system.

'I am Triclamadan.'

'Where do you come from?'

'The planets of a distant star.' Triclamadan gave the impression of choosing his words with care, like a linguist experimenting in a language he knew but had not much occasion to use.

'The light of this star is still visible from the limits of your galaxy but the star itself has gone out, grown cold, long ago.'

'Then you have nowhere . . .'

Erikson was suddenly conscious of the heat of the ground all around him; vibrant solar heat. Phobos was not altogether an alien place.

'No,' agreed the extraordinary resonant voice. 'I have nowhere.'

There was no disguising the note of sadness. Erikson could have sworn that under stress of emotion the light radiating from the shuttle was dimmed momentarily.

'I have no home. I belong nowhere, nor do I wish to do so. It is as we have chosen.'

'Why did you come here, then?' asked Erikson. 'What do you want with John Gale?'

'A voice,' said Triclamadan simply. 'A brief incarnation. I wanted to talk to my friends.'

'Can we return to the shuttle?' Erikson was restless. 'What will become of Morris?'

He saw his partner slumped in an attitude of prayer against the rock.

'Suppose he were to die?' inquired Triclamadan.

'No!' exclaimed Erikson. 'No . . . he can get treatment. You don't kill a man for freaking out. I'm only worried he will try something again . . .'

There was no reply but presently a beam of light flicked out from the glowing arc around the shuttle and touched Morris on the helmet. He flinched and Erikson was alarmed. Then Morris got up, quite docile, and moved like a sleep-walker towards the shuttle. Erikson, automatically checking

his suit, plodded after him. They entered the light and it receded before them; the outlines of the shuttle became solid. Erikson reassembled the steps as best he could while Morris stood patiently waiting. The sense of well-being had left Erikson now; he felt let down, jumpy. The whole episode was taking on the aspect of a matter-of-fact but unsettling dream.

'Wait!' said Triclamadan, as Erikson turned to guide Morris up the steps. 'I will be leaving your craft.'

'You're going?' Erikson was dismayed. 'But I want to know ...'

'I will go. I am already breaking a covenant.'

Erikson was filled with a furious curiosity ... his head whirled with questions. What was the form, the origin, what were the capacities of this being? But there was one thing he must ask.

'Please!' he said. 'Can you help our mothership ... *Theta Nebraska*. Is there any way ... I'll give you her position.'

Triclamadan laughed.

'Helpless and demanding!' he grumbled. 'Children ... Mortals ...'

'You needed a voice,' Erikson was stubborn.

'No more!' ordered Triclamadan wearily. 'Get on board.'

Our covenant is not easily kept. How can I, however briefly embodied, send out a human being to face death? It may be that in some timefall we are destined to help this race or one like it. But for this time our choice, made in lost ages, will remain inviolate. For the sake of the Four Worlds, now dark, whose only light is in their children, irretrievably lost, let us, each one, maintain the covenant. Triclamadan returns to the deep and only true delight of contemplation and calculation in time. Triclamadan will speak no more.

The control room was cool and full of sweet air. Erikson took off his helmet and watched cautiously as Morris fumbled with his own.

'Glen?'

Morris stared vacantly at Erikson and smiled.

'What happened, Paul?'

'Are you feeling all right?'

'Sure, but I don't remember . . .'

'Can you start take-off procedures?' asked Erikson.

'Of course. Right away!'

'Go ahead then.' said Erikson. 'I must see to Johnny.'

The shuttle was suffused with light for an instant . . . the cabin partition glowed crystalline, transparent. Then the light was gone. Erikson dived for the scanner and tracked wildly up, over the ship, but he saw nothing. What had he expected . . . a fireball, a meteor, a gas cloud?

Morris uttered a strange cry:

'I saw . . .!'

'What?'

'You saw it too!' Morris was weeping. 'Forgive me Paul, forgive me . . .'

'I do forgive you.' said Erikson. 'Take it easy, Glen.'

'We had a vision!' said Morris. 'We've been blessed. Oh God, God help me!'

'We saw something all right.' said Erikson.

'We are Elect!' said Morris. 'We've been singled out . . . don't you understand that? Nothing can ever be the same again. I've been cured. I was a madman, now I've been made whole again!'

'Steady . . .' said Erikson. 'Let's get to Marsport.'

'Yes . . . Yes . . . We have to leave.'

Morris went eagerly to his seat and began take-off procedures.

Erikson went into the cabin. Johnny Gale was sitting up on the cot and eating a cheese stick.

'Hi man!' he said. 'Where is everyone? I had the wildest dreams!'

'Johnny?' Erikson did not need to ask. 'How do you feel?'

'Great. Is that *Morris* you have out there?'

'That's right.'

'Paul, that guy is crazy. He was fighting me when I fell down the companionway, back there on *Theta*. Say . . . how are those guys?'

'We contacted Marsport. They should have help by now.'

'We're not in Marsport yet?'

'Phobos,' said Erikson. 'We had a fuel link problem. We'll be moving out right away.'

'But this Morris ...'

'He won't give any more trouble. I know he's crazy, or he was, but something happened.'

'I know,' said Johnny. 'I can't put it together ... but something did happen.'

They stared at each other. Erikson remembered what Morris had just said: nothing will ever be the same.

'What do you recall?' he asked.

'There was someone else here,' said Johnny. He lay back on the cot and fixed his eyes on the low ceiling. 'Someone else. It wasn't ...'

'Go on ...'

'Not human,' said Johnny. 'How would you say it ...'

'A being,' said Erikson. 'I don't know. Morris has been freaked right out. He thinks he saw God.'

'No,' said Johnny. 'This was some kind of free-floating intelligence. Something from out there.'

'That's what he said. "The planets of a distant star."'

'You *spoke* to it?' Johnny breathed deeply. 'Then I guess it was using my voice.'

'You were conscious?'

'Not really.'

'Was it bad? Painful?'

'Hell no. It was a good trip. I have pictures in my head, Paul. Pictures of places I've never been.'

'He was broadcasting,' said Erikson. 'Using that panel in some combination of frequencies ...'

He remembered the lights that winked at him from the panel.

'Record!' he exclaimed. 'He was using record ...'

Johnny stabbed playback; they both caught their breath. Johnny turned up the volume a little.

'My voice ...' he whispered.

The door slid back and Morris came in, bright-faced.

'Listen . . .' he said. 'It's the Messenger, isn't it? The angel . . .'

Johnny switched off abruptly.

'Keep away from me!'

'Johnny,' pleaded Morris. 'I'm sorry for what I did. I was mad, I was evil . . . but now there has been an Intervention. He turned to Erikson.

'Paul . . . were those words spoken by the Messenger?'

'That's right, Glen.' Erikson was embarrassed.

'Johnny's been blessed. He was the Instrument.' Morris looked from one man to the other with an awful humility. 'I'd deeply appreciate hearing every word on that tape.'

'Okay Johnny,' said Erikson. 'He's right. We'd better hear it.'

'Paul . . . said Johnny Gale. 'What do we do about this whole deal? Can we put in reports?'

'I guess we have to,' said Erikson.

'They'll crucify us,' said Johnny.

'Yes!' said Morris eagerly. 'But we must leave out nothing.'

'My own voice!' cried Johnny. 'They'll say it was some kind of fever dream!'

'I was crazy!' said Morris. 'I have to admit . . . so much. I wasn't *responsible* . . .

'Where does that leave me?' asked Erikson. 'I've got no excuses.'

He felt a kind of grim exhilaration.

'Play the tape!' he said. 'We have to complete this mission.'

Dr Thomas to Air Commodore Voss

. . . The most puzzling case of all is Lieutenant Erikson. He was neither drugged nor disturbed; his service record rates him highly on courage, coolness and initiative. I'm sure you understand, Margot, that in view of this incident we will have to go very cautiously in the matter of his psychological clearance. After Morris we can't afford any more slip-ups. This is a pity because Erikson has a service background . . . his grandfather was one of the 'Mars Pioneers'. I believe the

MO from *Theta Nebraska*, Elizabeth Marshall, has been making representations to the top brass regarding Erikson's future assignment. She has a personal interest here of course.

John Gale will be watched closely during the period of his convalescence and there has been talk of giving him limited clearance afterwards. It has been suggested that the kid should be taken to Duke for a barrage of psi tests at the Rhine Institute . . . I'm not sure that I will go along with this. His 'entity' did mention 'an extra sense' but so far the only remarkable thing about Gale is his robust good health.

In some ways the crewman Glen Morris, who experienced a conversion, has benefited most from the Phobos affair. It seems clear now that our department let this man . . . and how many others . . . get by all our screening. There are hints of instability in his record. On his own admission he pushed Gale down a companionway on *Theta* after picking a fight. He harboured a grudge against Erikson . . . but did he actually try to kill him? Did he in fact attempt to lure Erikson on a moon-walk, first by reporting 'a creature', then by scraping on the hull? It is a little far-fetched. Morris, of course, is the only one of the three men with a religious background: his aged parents live in upper New York State and pay tithes to the New Age Gospel Church. The video film I mentioned certainly shows Morris and Erikson on their moon-walk but their actions on camera are inconclusive.

One of the most interesting aspects of the whole case is the behaviour of the crew of *Theta Nebraska*. Ever since their rescue Captain Trant and the others have exhibited a touching loyalty to the three crewmen who travelled on the shuttle, to the point of mass hallucination if not deliberate perjury. Stress of time and distance weld these little knots of personnel too closely together . . . I've always thought so. The affidavits of the crew are not included in this file I'm sending you but briefly they tell the following story.

The life support systems of *Theta Nebraska* failed partly as a result of one faulty electrical system. This block of circuits, they claim, mysteriously 'began to function again'

around 16.00 hours, *Theta* time, some twenty minutes before the lighter from Marsport made contact. At this time the men and women aboard *Theta* were on quarter flow suit oxygen and some were in a stuporous condition. As might be expected a crewman happened to be gazing from a port-hole and he saw 'a strange light' playing around the ship's markings. The whole complement of *Theta Nebraska* survived their ordeal; they made contact with the shuttle crew in Marsport base hospital. So much for independent corroboration.

Margot, I will admit to you that the screening of these three men and the tests and assessments involved have been a tough assignment. Security has been breathing down my neck all the way; there have been several of these 'alien infiltration' scares in the last ten years and they are naturally very wary. I cannot help feeling that this case will have repercussions for many years to come. On the present evidence . . . and I stress that . . . I cannot accept the incarnation of 'Triclamadan' as an independent reality. Here stand I . . . I can do no other.

Gale's cheerful certainty weighs heavily upon me . . . so does the enthusiasm of Morris. Erikson's good sense torments me most of all. If I take comfort from anything during these periods of doubt it is in the supreme impartiality of the wretched transcripts . . . the expressed wish not to become involved in human affairs. I am tempted, particularly at night, in my Sycamore, flying home over the metropolitan seaboard, to bring up those curious frequencies . . . which of course Gale remembered . . . and conjure anything that might be listening to maintain the covenant and keep its distance.

THE MAN WHO

by

DAVID S. GARNETT

That old Monday morning feeling is a familiar horror in the context of the working rhythms of our society. But for Spearman this notorious Monday morning feeling in his way of life came to have a peculiar horror.

THE MAN WHO

TIREDLY Spearman stretched out his arm, found the cut-off button and silenced the alarm. After a while he sat up and pushed the covers back. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he put on his slippers and stood up. It was Monday. Into the bathroom. Monday came around far too often. It always seemed to be Monday. How many were there in a week? More than one, surely.

While shaving he managed to cut himself twice. He did that every time he used a new blade. It had not happened very long ago, either. When had he last started on a new blade? A fortnight ago, he guessed. The cuts stung as he dabbed on the after-shave. He tried to stop the blood with bits of tissue paper. Must remember to take them off before going out.

In the kitchen he filled the kettle, plugged it in and switched it on. The grill went on next to give it a chance to warm up. Even as he opened the fridge door, he remembered there was no bacon. He had finished the last of it over the weekend, but forgotten to buy any more when he did his shopping. A fried egg, then; he knew he had some eggs. Off went the grill, on went the frying pan. The kettle boiled before the egg was ready, but by the time he had poured his coffee and found there was no milk, it had got too hard. He swore quietly a couple of times. A ruined egg and black coffee was far from the ideal breakfast. This had happened too often. Running out of bacon. And milk. He would have to change dairies. It was not too much to expect delivery by eight o'clock. Late yesterday, too. Spearman paused in mid-thought. No, he realized, not yesterday. That was Sunday and he had stayed in bed until ten or eleven. When had it been? Not long ago. The end of last week perhaps.

But he had better things to think about than milk. Rinsing his cup and plate, he wondered how long he would have to do that for himself. The way things were going, he would probably be married by the end of the year. He smiled, remembering Saturday night. It was a battle of wits. Sharon was an old-fashioned girl. She would not sleep with him until he had suggested marriage, and he would not propose until he had got her into bed. The affair was approaching its grand climax. Soon it would be decided one way or another. Yet whatever the outcome, Spearman knew he would lose. He always did.

On the fourth or fifth try his car started. He did not like leaving it outside, but without a garage there was no alternative. He wound down the window and was instantly reminded that the exhaust needed fixing. It would save him pounds if he went by bus. It was not the petrol; that was the least expensive part. But with tax, insurance, repairs, it all added up. It took him to college, brought him back. That was all. But it was the kind of thing he was expected to have.

You're trapped, he told himself. Trapped, Spearman, old chap. Trapped by the things you're *expected* to do. You're *expected* to have a car, so you have one. Neither too cheap nor too flashy. Discreetly expensive, he thought, liking the phrase. There was even the way he looked, how he dressed. Nothing was ever said, but it was assumed that lecturers would behave like other lecturers. It was *expected* of them. If only he could quit.

But he was far from quitting and he knew it. His first degree results had been disappointing; he had been lucky getting the chance of trying for a master's. He had done better with that, but not as well as others. Then came the quest for employment. But what use were qualifications in history? Eventually he had ended up as assistant lecturer in his home town's college. Later, if he did research and had a few things published, he could try for a university post. Yet the way things were going, it seemed he would be stuck where he was forever.

It took twenty minutes to get there. About average, or perhaps a little longer because it was Monday. It did not seem quite so busy as it usually did at the start of a new week. Like last Monday. Last Monday? What, thought Spearman, do I mean by that? Last Monday a long section of road was being repaired and the traffic flow was restricted. It had added ten minutes to his journey. When had it last been so quiet for a Monday? Quite a while, he reasoned, though it seemed only yesterday. But yesterday was Sunday and he had not had the car out.

He wondered if he had left anything behind. Something was bothering him, and maybe that was it. Those essays? Yes, he finished marking them on Sunday—yesterday. They were in his briefcase, though the best place for them was a furnace. There was nothing else worth forgetting; he kept all his lecture notes in his room except when he was using them. It was hard to forget the time he had made a few preliminary remarks before discovering he had left all his notes at home. It was the shortest lecture he had ever given.

Turning left into the car park, he glanced in the mirror. It was still there. A new black Ford—at least he thought it was a Ford; all cars were beginning to look alike—had been on his tail almost since he set off. At first he had thought it wanted to overtake; but apparently he was wrong. The windscreen was tinted, and it was impossible to see the driver very clearly even though he was no more than a couple of dozen feet behind him most of the time. He braked and waited for the barrier to be raised. Glancing out of the window, he saw the car continue along the main road. He thought no more about it. At such an hour he found it difficult to think of anything. He had the first year economics group at nine, but even if there was no lecture he would still have been arriving about now. His head of department frowned on those who only turned up when they had classes. Monday was Spearman's best day: only two lectures, no seminars. But the rest of the time he was expected to be available for student consultation, as well as do marking or perhaps some research or lecture preparation.

At last the barrier was up and he drove across the asphalt

surface, past rows of neatly parked vehicles. He reversed into his own space, neatly missing the bumper of the next car. He picked up his briefcase and got out, slamming and locking the door. On the other side was a car he had not seen before. It was new, a pale green version of the one which had been behind him as he arrived. He remembered thinking the first time he saw it that it must have replaced the Volkswagen normally parked there. He began to walk away, then stopped. When had he first thought it must have replaced the Volkswagen? He had never seen it before. The VW had been there on Friday; he had exchanged a few words with its owner. Yet he had seen the pale green car before. Parked there. Often. His mind held its image as it stood next to his own car. It was like a number of identical frames on a reel of film, each one a day further back. But parallel to it was another film, only this time the Volkswagen was recorded in each successive frame. It was not a very pleasant sensation, and for some reason he began to feel a bit dizzy. Until now he had barely been conscious of having a headache, but thinking of it made his head throb even more. He would have to see if there was any aspirin or codeine at the office. And maybe he should speak with the owner of the pale green car. He started walking again, trying to let the mystery ebb away. It was not important. Strange, though.

The engineering wing through which he took a short cut was brick-built and looked out of place amongst the concrete and glass of the other blocks, yet it was the oldest part of the college. The whole layout was haphazard, each building incongruous in turn. The college had not been planned, it had simply grown. Building followed building; almost as soon as one was completed, another would be begun. The one now going up was a hall of residence, a twenty storey prefabricated tower.

Spearman's department was housed in the newest of the teaching blocks. It was practically deserted at the moment, and he was able to take one of the two lifts to the fourth floor. That would be impossible in a quarter of an hour; there would be a crowd around each lift, the stairs jammed. At

least once a week they broke down and were out of action the rest of the day, students wandering in late complaining of having to climb several flights. But so early, almost quarter to nine, he had the lift to himself and rode to the fourth floor without being stopped. He knocked on the office door and went in. A middle-aged woman was standing in the far corner, sorting through a filing cabinet. She turned as the door opened.

'Good morning, Mr. Spearman.'

'Hello, Marge,' he said—everyone called her that. 'I wondered if you had something for a headache.'

'I'll have a look.' She slid back the cabinet drawer and walked towards her desk, where she picked up her handbag.

As she rifled through it, Spearman knew she would find something. She always had done before. Before? He had never asked her for anything for a headache until today, of that he was certain. And yet he had the feeling that he had done, though he did not know exactly when.

'Here you are.'

She handed him a bottle of tablets. It all seemed so familiar.

'Thanks.' He tapped a couple of white tablets into his palm, gave back the bottle and left.

Outside, waiting for the lift, there was a tall, light-suited man. Spearman had seen him a number of times, though he did not know whether he was a student or a member of staff. He could not recall any particular instance when he had seen the man previously, but there was nothing very unusual in that. He saw hundreds of people in and around college every day, but knew only a fraction of them. He walked along the corridor to his own room, and as he did so he could feel the man's eyes boring into him.

Twenty minutes later Spearman went into one of the larger rooms on the third floor. Long ago he had discovered it was hopeless trying to start a lecture on time, but after five minutes almost everybody who was going to come would be there. The only trouble was that once they realized he always began five minutes late, they would begin

to turn up that much later themselves. Most of the usual seats were occupied; the ones at the back. Not bad attendance for a Monday morning. But this was a first year group, and they were still in the winter term. In a few months they would not be so keen. Many would not bother to come in. If they copied someone else's notes, they would not miss much—that was, after all, almost the method by which Spearman had written his lectures. He began speaking. He tried not to read straight from his notes, remembering how phoney it had seemed when he was on the receiving end. Nor could he talk off the cuff. That would have been quite impressive. One of his own lecturers used to do that, but he had been reciting exactly the same thing for over thirty years. In a subject like history, or in this case economic history, once he had made a set of notes he would be set for life. A very depressing prospect.

As he spoke he glanced at his class. They all looked as bored as he felt. Many wrote as fast as they could, however, trying to get enough down to prevent extra reading. Spearman did not blame them. There were better things to do in life than study the growth of the railway system. Often he thought how useless it all was, how he wasted his life dictating worthless information. But no, it did have a use: it would get them through their exams. And if they could stick it for three years, they were made. No one failed. Anyone that bad would long ago have quit the course. It was all a hoax, a massive confidence trick. The great god Education. What value was it? Did it have any purpose? He tried to stop thinking about it. He was important to himself. How could he damn his whole life as futile?

He thought how remarkable it was that he could spout such nonsense and at the same time have his mind on something completely different. Then the door opened. Spearman stopped thinking and turned to face the door. Throughout the room heads were being raised. One of the students came in. Spearman looked at his watch, making it obvious that he was doing so. It was nine-fifteen. He had spoken to the newcomer about his lateness before. He would listen to what he had to say, then refuse to admit him. He had been late . . .

When had he been late? It had happened recently. Last week, could it have been? Spearman knew it had happened. But not quite like this—exactly like this.

He did not have to listen to the excuse because he had heard it before, knew precisely what was going to be said even as it was said. Flawless *deja vu*? he wondered. Unthinking, he waved the student away, to go and sit down, then resumed where he had left off. Was it a trick, an accident? The student could have come in late last Monday and said exactly the same thing. If not, it had to be *deja vu*. There was no other explanation. He had experienced the phenomenon previously of course, but never like this. It always seemed to be after the event that he remembered, not while it was still occurring.

Continuing to read from his notes, he let his mind pursue another path. If it was not *deja vu*, the student really must have arrived late some other time. But when? It would have to be a Monday. Not last Monday, he could recall that one quite clearly. He worked his way back through a sequence of Mondays, back as far as the summer vacation. No. He had never been late before. And yet . . . and yet . . .

At the same time, as if superimposed across these memories, he had a picture of the student coming in late. More than that: he had a whole series of them, the earliest ones fading far into the past. As though it had happened not once but countless times before. Simultaneously came the recollection of him recalling this . . . recalling it times without number. Day after day after day. An endless chain, each link a Monday. This Monday. It was ridiculous, a crazy daytime nightmare. Today was Monday. Yesterday was Sunday. Yesterday he had been with Sharon. But another memory denied this, telling him the day before he had driven to college, had a headache, got some tablets from Marge, begun to lecture, been interrupted, realized he had been interrupted in exactly the same way before, realized that he had realized he had been interrupted . . .

He tried to concentrate on lecturing, remembering that he had done this the last time, and the time before, and the time before. Not lectured to this group, because he had done that

each Monday: each Monday since the start of term. Nor given the same lecture, because he had done that to a corresponding group both years since he had been at this college. No: Given the same lecture to the same group. Often. Too often to count. But when?

When?

Somehow he was able to finish the lecture, or almost finish it. He cut it short ten minutes early, unable to continue. Slowly he walked back to his room as he had done so often before. So often. By the coffee machine was the man in the light suit. He was staring straight at Spearman.

Behind his desk, head in hands, Spearman tried to puzzle it out. He was alone in his room and glad of it; the three others with whom he shared it were out.

Let's get this straight, he said to himself: You think that today, or today's events, have happened before. And more than once. Is that reasonable? No, but it's true. How else can it be explained? If there is anything which needs explaining, of course. Are you imagining it all?

Was there anyone he could ask about it? Certainly none of the other three, even had they been present. Head of department? Marge? She was always ready with a word of sympathy. Yet what could he say? He did not feel up to asking anyone; he would be thought an idiot. What about professional advice? A psychiatrist perhaps, or would it be a psychologist? A doctor ought to know.

Dammit all, he thought, I don't know what I'm so bothered about. It's not serious. It doesn't hurt. It'll probably wear off. If not, there's plenty of time to see about it.

He had enough to keep him busy and he began marking essays. It was annoying to discover as he marked each one that he had checked it before. Many times. He kept at it until lunchtime, the other three joining him at intervals. Spearman did not say much. And anyway, he realized in retrospect, he never had said much the other Mondays. Kennings suggested eating and they went out together. For some reason Spearman glanced back as they approached the refectory. From one of the windows on the top floor some-

one was looking out. Spearman knew who he was and what he was staring at.

In the refectory there was a good choice, but he selected what he often had: steak and kidney pie, chips and beans, followed by some sort of mushy apple dessert. It was a better meal than those he usually fixed for himself, and he was not at all surprised to discover he had chosen the same things as all the other times.

He was no longer bothered about not talking, and it amused him listening to Kennings. It proved how boring the other man was. How many times had he said exactly the same thing? Spearman got on best with Kennings. He never really understood why this was so; they were complete opposites. Kennings was older, married with three—or maybe four by now—children, and had spent a number of years in industry before turning to teaching. His chief interests were drinking, gambling and sport. Spearman always felt inferior in Kennings' company, but he did not resent him for it.

Walking downstairs, they passed the light-suited man. His face was thin but tanned, hair almost white. He seemed to be in his mid-twenties. He was leaning against the window near the bottom of the stairs, the same intent, almost anxious, expression on his face. He made no attempt to conceal his interest in Spearman. Instead it was the assistant lecturer who had to avert his eyes from the other's gaze. Something bothered Spearman, but whatever it was hovered at the wrong side of the boundary of his consciousness. He finally became aware of what it was as he entered the lift to return to his room.

Spearman had two sets of memories. The first set consisted of what had happened yesterday: yesterday, Sunday, and all the previous days. He could remember what he had done last week, last month, last year. Superimposed upon these was the other sequence. A couple of minutes ago he had left the refectory, but at the same time he could remember having left there yesterday under exactly the same circumstances. But it was not exactly the same. He did not remember the man in the light suit being there 'yesterday'. He had ridden up in the lift with him that time, or perhaps

he was confusing it with another occasion. Always the man was in different places, always he was watching him. Who was he? What did he want? It could be no accident that their paths kept intersecting. The man's shifting positions represented the only changes in Spearman's day. In every other respect today had been identical with all his other 'yesterdays'. Why should the man have this independence when Spearman had no such freedom of action?

It was ironic, he thought, how only this morning he had been thinking how trapped he was: trapped by the things he was expected to do. It was truer than he had thought. He was in a rut, snared by routine, and this was the first time he recognized it. Everything he had done today he had done before. Was there any way he could escape, break the bonds of habit? If he knew what came next, possibly he could alter the pattern. But he did not know. He only became conscious of repetition as it occurred. Before the event he was as ignorant of the future as anyone else. There did not even seem to be any way he could make use of this ability. His talent—if that was what it could be called—was totally superfluous. What use was there in knowing that an event had already taken place? If he knew beforehand, that would be different.

But was it only him? Was Monday a never-ending repeat performance for everyone? Kennings, for example. Today he had behaved exactly as he had done numerous times. Was he conscious of it? Spearman looked over at him: He was sitting back in his chair reading a newspaper, lighting a cigarette. He flicked the match over his shoulder, missing the waste bin by a good few feet. He never used a lighter, always a match. He did not appear bothered by anything, but Kennings never seemed worried whatever happened. What do I expect, wondered Spearman. Do I look worried? He did not think so. But he supposed he was not really worried; just very puzzled and curious.

'Do you ever,' said Spearman, 'get the feeling you've been here before?' He would not have asked, but Kennings had looked up while he was watching him, and he had said the first thing which came into his head.

'Deja vu? Yeah. Why?'

Spearman shrugged. 'I was just wondering.'

'You've got it now?' Kennings put down his paper and let his chair fall back on to all four legs.

'Yes. Have you?'

'No, not at the moment. And even when I do, I doubt its existence.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if I think a thing has happened before, it must be because it has.'

'Go on.'

'If I'm doing something, say, and I think it's familiar, that's because it is: I've done it before. See? That's all it is. You've got it now. But how often have you sat in this room, with me reading over here? There's your answer.'

Spearman was disappointed: Kennings had not said what he thought he was going to. Yet, as he was saying it, he had realized that his words were inevitable. The man had no command over them; he merely reiterated what he had said endless times before.

'You don't look as though you believe me.' The words came back, echoes of a thousand todays.

'No,' said Spearman. 'It doesn't explain why you can feel it in places you've never been before.'

'But you've been here many times.'

Many times, Spearman agreed silently. There seemed little point in going on. Kennings seemed unaware that today's events had occurred previously. He knew the man could not be unable to say he had lived today before, because there was nothing to prevent Spearman himself from saying so. Nothing at all, but all he said was:

'I suppose you're right.'

It began to seem as though he was the only one aware of what was happening. He did not like it. For no reason he could explain, he began to feel afraid. Sitting at his desk, outwardly in complete control of himself, he knew he would have to escape, try to break his routine. Was that why the stranger was watching him? Could Spearman be under observation because he was different? Because he knew?

He had to give another lecture in half an hour, but could he? Was he in any state to face a bunch of students? No, he concluded; definitely not. He had never missed a single lecture in the two years he had been here. This one might as well be the first. And if he avoided it, perhaps that would sever the bond and allow him to carry on his life some other way.

It was easier than he had imagined. The head of department was sympathetic when Spearman told him he was feeling ill, and said it would do no harm to delay the lecture by a week. Ideally, Spearman knew, he should have gone straight home without stopping. He had even reached the lift before turning back and asking permission to leave.

As he entered the car park, the man in the light suit was standing in his path. Could he speak to the man, ask him why his every move was being watched? He reached the man and, without looking directly at him, went around him as though he did not exist. The stranger did not try to block his way, but simply turned and continued watching.

Spearman kept walking, not glancing back, resisting the urge to run. Reaching his car, he fumbled as he tried to unlock the door, dropping the key. Eventually he got the door open and sat down, breathing heavily and wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. After a few seconds he started the car.

It was only then that he realized how futile it all was: as far back as he could remember he had left early, trying to escape. He had never succeeded. There seemed little point in continuing; he might just as well go back and give the lecture. Yet he could not face doing that. He was determined to leave, either to return home or go for a drive. Whatever it was to be, he could not stay where he was. He slipped the gear lever into first and drove slowly towards the exit. There was no sign of the man.

Carefully, he refrained from letting his eyes wander to the rearview mirror all the time he was driving back. It was almost three o'clock as he parked the car, went inside, bolted the door, and promised himself he would not venture

out again for the rest of the day. He drew all the curtains and spent most of the afternoon walking from room to room, cautiously peering through one of the windows every few minutes. He never saw anything out of the ordinary and he knew that he would not. How could anything he had seen so many times be out of the ordinary?

The evening was better, he was not so restless. The kitchen cabinet had needed a second coat of paint for months. He did not like painting, probably because he could never seem to get it right, even with the latest non-drip, one-coat paints. It would be too thick or too thin, or there would not be enough of it, or it would run and leave the surface streaky. And always there was paint everywhere—on his hands, face, clothes. The phone rang several times. It was probably Sharon but he never answered. When he had finished painting he could not understand why it had taken him so long. He went around wiping paint off the doors and walls. There was a lot around the windows. As he rubbed at the smears with a turpentine-soaked rag, he still wondered where all the hours had flown.

It was too late to call anyone. If he was still experiencing this time dislocation tomorrow, he would go and see a doctor. Perhaps he always sensed it, but forgot until the next day. Or because of the next day. Possibly everyone felt it, and there was a mental block which prevented it being discussed.

But the man had been watching him. He had to be doing it for some purpose. Or no purpose: He watched because he watched. Did anything have a purpose? Could not things simply happen? Why hamstring events with argument? Spearman had lived this day before. He could not deny it, so why should he question it?

As he lay in bed he compared his day to a loop of tape endlessly repeating itself. Then he thought of a better analogy: a record with its stylus caught in one of the grooves, the same phrase recurring time after time. Some day it would free itself. It had to. Had to.

Meanwhile, Monday follows Monday. Sometimes the

light-suited man sits in a car, sometimes he is looking out of a window or leaning against a wall. But wherever he is, he is always watching Spearman. Apart from that, every day is exactly the same as the one before the one before the one before the one before the one

YOU GET LOTS OF YESTERDAYS,
LOTS OF TOMORROWS,
AND ONLY ONE TODAY.

by

LAURENCE JAMES

Happiness, well-being, contentment—these are states of being transient, evanescent. Glimpses of joy are vouchsafed we individual members of humanity at desperately infrequent moments, hard to catch and impossible to hold. And yet—is it not everyone's right as a human being to experience at least one day's happiness? On the evidence of this story this is a belief shared by Laurence James. But, in a drab and overpopulated world of rigidly restricted resources that is one terrifying future possibility, how to guarantee such a right?

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LOTS OF TOMORROWS,
AND ONLY ONE TODAY.

HIGH. Binomial eyes clicked. A light film of thinnest oil eased tumblers. On the control panels, dazzling arrays of changing colours—a rainbow of reaction. On the master board, wheels danced and numbers flashed. At last the digits slowed, settled, became finite. The selection was made. For that part of that day in that part of the city. High.

The audio alarm chattered the room awake. 'Seven hours. Friday June fourteen. Warm. Dry. Rising to twenty-eight.'

On the right side of the bed the woman stirred and sat up, brushing the last fragments of the night out of the corners of her eyes. She looked round the room, then down at the sleeping man beside her. As she so often thought, it was almost like entering a new world every morning when she woke. Her name was

'Cordelia Green. As the children have a non-ed day, you have to prepare mid-Food for them. Your husband, Peter, has to return city-work tomorrow. Check his clean work clothes. Last night's voco-memo ends with a reminder that the lower flower bed needs weeding. That is all. It is now time to prepare first food for Jason and Belle. Enjoy your day.'

Cordelia vaguely noticed that the automatic end greeting on the tape was becoming scratched. She wondered what she could do about it. Suddenly she realized that Peter had sneaked up out of sleep. His hand had feathered its way beneath the bed-covering, up under her demure blue sleep-gown and had gently touched her body.

'Peter, no!' She was genuinely shocked and didn't know

how to react. A thrill of fear blended with excitement. It was so early in the morning. His hand moved again.

'Peter!' Her voice rose to a whispered squeak. 'Stop it. I've got to get first food for Belle and Jason. Please, darling.' The word tasted odd and thrilling in her mouth. 'Darling, there isn't time.'

His rich masculine voice breathed warm in her ear and her resistance, which wasn't very certain anyway, edged away. 'Dee, sweetheart, there's always time for this.'

Pink, toothless mouths opened to receive the grey tablets from the sterile grey plastic tube. Eyes either remained closed or gazed vacantly, unfocused, at the muted pastel walls. Ears barely registered the rising and falling of selected sounds. First food was served.

The fresh eggs gurgled brightly in the shiny copper frying pan, yolks golden-yellow and whites as pure as perfection. Under the eye-level grill, crisp sausages nudged shoulders with golden-brown slices of toast. In the rack above, a row of four large willow-pattern plates warming ready for the food. On the clean plastic work-top, a coffee percolator cheeped and mumbled merrily to itself.

Sitting on the pine stools close up to the kitchen table were the two children, bright as two new buttons on a sailor's suit. Jason aged about eight and Belle who looked a couple of years younger. Pausing from preparing the first food, Cordelia wondered for a moment just exactly when their birthdays were. As Peter walked into the trim kitchen, she shook her head and smiled at him. 'It's a good job he can't read my mind,' she thought. 'He's always saying I've got a mind like a sieve.'

Peter ruffled Jason's hair affectionately and sat down beside him. 'Come on, Dee. Your family's starving while you just stand there day-dreaming. The eggs are nearly done and the kids haven't had their crunchy granola. What's picking you now, love?'

Dee smiled absently, concentrating on pouring the fresh milk on to the cereal. 'Nothing really. I was just wondering how old, bother,' milk had spilt on the table, 'wondering,

well, not really wondering, more trying to remember, how old Belle and, pass me the cloth love, thanks, and, er, Mason. How old Mason and Belle are.'

Peter had moved beside her to give her the white linen cloth and he now put his arm round her shoulders and pecked a gentle kiss at the back of her neck. 'You are a silly, Dee. You ask me that at least once a ten. Belle is six and, and Mason is seven. Hey, those eggs are done.'

First food was over and the morning had begun. The beds began to vibrate gently, rocking the sleepers, keeping their muscles from atrophy. The sounds continued. At intervals, still pictures and films were flashed on one of the walls. It made no difference whether the occupants of the rooms were awake or not. As the di-ethyltriaquadone slipped through the system, a mouth would open in a half-smile. A trickle of pale yellow saliva ran over the gums, past the lips and over the hairless chin. The morning went on.

'Can we go and play in the garden, please, Mummy?'

'All right, Belle, love. Wait a minute; let me just have a look at you.'

The little girl smiled at her mother and turned slowly round, showing off her lilac print frock. She had a dark blue ribbon in her long blonde hair, white knee socks and little brown sandals with brass buckles. Cordelia reached out on an impulse and pulled her daughter to her. She breathed deeply of the fresh smell of sun-bleached hair; with a quick laugh, Belle wriggled away from her and skipped into the garden to join her older brother.

Dee straightened up with a sigh. Sometimes she thought that her daughter was so beautiful that it made her catch her breath with the sudden lump in her throat. It was a feeling of fragile impermanence. A feeling that everything would pass and fade away like the morning dew.

Upstairs, the hum of a motor told her that Peter was shaving. Since it was back to city-work the next day, she tip-toed into the living-room and poured a couple of vodka martinis, crumbling in ice from the vacuum-bucket. She put two

Grand Canyon coasters on the top of the videogram and carefully placed the frosted glasses on them. She glanced down the list of tapes and pressed the select for the third movement of the baroque 'Four Seasons' by Vivaldi.

As the rich rounded sounds filled out the corners of the bright room, Peter walked in.

'Mmm. Nice. What is it? Sounds like Johann Sebastian mighty Bach. What is it, Dee?'

Her mind blanked. In panic she tried to remember what the name had been alongside the button. Peter saw her distress and smiled gently. 'Never mind, darling. It's nice, and that's all that matters. Drinks; this early in the day.' Standing beside her, they looked together out through the crystal window at the children playing happily together in the sunlit garden. His arm rested across her shoulders and his hand slipped down to cover her breast. 'Shame the children have a non-ed day; we could have gone upstairs for a quiet hour.'

Cordelia laughed and moved away from him. 'Peter, you really are dreadful. Come on. Let's go out into the garden.'

He pretended great disappointment. 'Not upstairs?'

'No. Not upstairs.'

It was ten. The sun was well up and the garden with its high wall and tall trees was already hot. Mason and Belle were huddled close together under the cool fronds of the weeping willow, by the small stream that slipped through the garden. Playing some secret game.

Peter and Cordelia strolled across the springy turf and sat down near the rose arbour. 'I have to do some weeding later on, Peter. The lower bed.'

'Do it after mid-food, darling. It's such a lovely day. It'd be a shame to waste it all on weeding. Why don't we just have an idle morning, breathe in some of God's good air and rest our bodies? Tell you what; I'll go and freshen up these drinks and you go and get a book and I'll read some to you. How about that?'

'Oh, yes, Peter. That'd be just fine. And, you could put more of that music on.'

'More Bach?'

'Yes. Bach. Wait a minute, love. Where is the book?'

'Get the one that I read some of every night. It's on the little table by our bed.'

Dee walked back to the house, luxuriating in the feel of the soft grass on her bare feet, tickling between her toes. Through the living room and up the stairs to the top. To the top, where she paused, hesitated, and then turned right, opening the first sliding panel she came to. It was the small room.

After, she washed her hands and dried them in the wall blower, trying other doors until she recognized their bedroom. On the table alongside the bed on her side. No, on Peter's side. Of course. He'd been reading to her from the book. Every night.

As Dee walked back out into the sun, blinking at the strong light, she flicked open the pages of the book, to see what it was about. But, the shapes and lines blurred and flickered in front of her eyes. Peter saw her peering and took it from her.

'No peeking to see how it goes on.'

Cordelia sat down again and lay back, covering her eyes against the glow of the sun. Peter stretched out beside her and began to read.

'For every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. There is a time to be born and there is a time to die. There is a time to sow and there is a time to reap. There is a time to kill and there is a time to heal. There is a time to destroy and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance. There is a time to cast stones away and a time to gather stones together. There is a time to get and there is a time to lose. A time to love and a time to hate. A time to fight and a time of peace.'

Belle and Mason had come over, attracted by their father's voice and the fine rolling words that he read. They sat down one on each side of Cordelia and put their arms around her. She kept her eyes closed and let the words wash over her. All around her she could hear the songs of birds. So many birds. All with a different cry. She wished she knew the names of some of them. But, she knew that they were birds.

Peter smiled at the happy family group. 'Shall I read a bit more, Dee?'

She nodded silently. 'All right; now listen. This is something for you to remember, always.'

Dee was sure that she would always remember the words he read out to them that day. That perfect, sunny day.

'The sun ariseth and the sun goeth down, and hastens to the place from which it arose. All the rivers run to the sea, yet the sea is not full. The rivers return, like all things, to the place from whence they came. The thing that hath been, is that which shall be, and that which is done is that which shall be done and there is no new thing under the sun. There is no remembrance of things past, nor shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come. My yesterdays are ever-present. My tomorrow is another now. All things pass. All things pass.'

Cordelia found her cheeks wet as he finished reading and she hastily wiped them dry as she sat up. 'Time to eat, everyone. I'll bring the food out here into the garden. Children, go and have a wash.'

As she walked back into the house she felt a momentary doubt as to what food she might give them. It was a relief to go into the steel and formica kitchen and find that everything was ready. Crystal bowls glittered, filled with the freshest of lettuce. White china groaned under sliced ham, tongue, pickles, breast of chicken, quartered eggs, tomatoes, home-baked loaves, summery cucumbers as thin as a whisper, onions and so much, much more. Each person's cutlery was wrapped in a linen serviette. Small pewter pots of salt and pepper waited ready. A glass jug of fresh orange juice for Mason and Belle and two crystal goblets for Peter and herself. She looked around for the drink that she knew must be somewhere. 'In the fridge, darling,' said Peter, who'd come in to help her carry it all out.

She opened the door of the high fridge and there, chilled to perfection for a hot day, were two bottles of Rheinhessen Auslese.

While the sun shone across the green, walled garden, the four of them ate and drank until it seemed that none of them

could possibly take any more—though Mason distinguished himself by forcing down four portions of strawberries and ice-cream. Afterwards, while the children read quietly and Peter played patience, Dee slipped into easy sleep, undisturbed by the lone song of a wheeling lark.

Each unit to be not more than two point three metres high, two point two metres wide and three point one metres long. The maximum deviation from these measurements is to be four per centum. Walls are to be any of the five recommended pastel colours. Rest unit to be standard grey (Unit colour No. 2984). Aural fittings as per plans. Calory, trans, hallucins and disposal standard as per plans 45-48 attached. Access intrusions lockable externally only.

Note: Following complaints from some areas concerning blockages of waste disposal piping, depth and width parameters are to be increased by twelve per centum. Only approved enamel and chrome are to be used and the amount of liquid for aiding disposal of faecal and other waste products can be increased in certain circumstances at the discretion of the WDO 2/c. Work is proceeding on attempts to by-pass these functions with compulsory operations; (see also leaflet on 'Colostomy—Pro and Con'.)

Midfood: In cases of extreme restlessness passing permissible noise tolerance, the midfood allowance may be increased by up to three ccs. Further allowance only under a signature of a C/E or above.

When Dee woke, the sun was fading away from the day. At least, the light was a little dimmer, and the air felt cooler and fresher. Because of the height of the walls and the trees—oak, ash and elm, because she'd heard the children identifying them—that towered round the garden, she never actually saw the sun. But, she knew it was there. It always was.

'Oh! Now I'll never get that weeding done. Why didn't you wake me, you beast, Peter?'

'Because you looked as though you needed the rest, my love. Anyway, while you snored your way through this

lovely afternoon, Mason and Belle and I have done your weeding for you. When you go in the living-room, make sure you notice the vase of anemones that the children picked for you. They got them specially as they're your favourites. Did you have a nice sleep?

She stretched luxuriously, like a cream-fed cat. 'Mmmm. Absolutely fabulous. One of the nicest sleeps I've ever had. Shall we go in and get ready for last-food? Then we can get the children off to sleep and have the evening to ourselves.'

'You're an incorrigibly wicked lady, Cordelia Green. Come on then.'

Arm resting gently on arm, they strolled together through the scented evening, into the cool house. Cordelia went first to the drinks cabinet and looked down the row of buttons. The taste of the morning's drink was still on her tongue and she tried to remember which button she had pressed that time. She thought it might have been the middle one, so she placed the glass in position and pressed. A deep green liquid, with the tang of mint, ran into the plastiglass, followed by a squirt of crushed ice.

Dee touched her lips to it and smiled appreciatively. It wasn't quite the same, but it was nice. She put another glass under the nozzle and pressed again. Holding them carefully, she carried the drinks across the room and gave one to Peter.

He drained it in one swallow and sighed. 'I really needed that after all my efforts in the garden. You're getting a superb judge of drinks. A lovely vodka martini to start the day and now this.'

'It's a sort of green martini, isn't it?'

Belle laughed. 'What a lovely name, Mummy. A green martini. It looks like a drink of liquid emerald. Very precious.'

'Emerald is a jewel. That's very clever, Belle. Yes, the drink's like a drink made from a jewel.'

While they sat on the long pine sofa, Peter and Dee idly watched the children playing on the rug. Mason had a number of small cubes of purple metal, while Belle had an equal number of clear glass spheres filled with mercury. The

object of the game was simply to try and capture as many as possible of the opponent's pieces inside your own.

By the time both children had won two games each, the digital clock showed exactly nineteen. Sleep time. Dee went to start last food while Peter read the children a poem—one of Edward Lear's called 'The Quangle Wangle Quee'.

Crusty farmhouse bread, cut thick with fresh butter and golden honey. A milk-white bowl of strawberries for each child, topped with cream so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Last food was finished off with a glass of ice-cold orange juice.

Once the meal was finished the children changed into their sleeping clothes. Mason had pale blue pyjamas with fine bold knights in armour. Belle's were the lightest of yellows and embroidered with Tenniel illustrations from 'Alice in Wonderland'. White rabbits, duchesses, queens, gardeners and one large, grinning Cheshire cat.

Dee had gone into the kitchen to begin the preparation of the last food for herself and Peter. Packs and tubes were mostly opened and thawing, while the oven heated itself. She was standing by the sink, separating some frozen beans when Belle and Mason trooped in to say goodnight.

Belle came to her mother first, reaching up with her arms open wide, eyes closed to plant a damp kiss on Dee's cheek. 'Night, night, Mummy. It's been such a nice day.'

'Sleep well, love. Nice dreams. Sleep well.'

Mason kissed his mother with rather more discretion, shying away from a splodge of cream on her face. 'Good-night, Mummy. Hasn't it been a nice day?'

'Yes, darling. One of the nicest days I've ever known. Now sleep well, have nice dreams and we'll have another nice day tomorrow. Night, night.'

The two small figures toddled happily off to bed, leaving Dee to get on with the last food.

In the cubes, a thick, vitamin-enriched liquid oozed from the tubes to fill the sterilized nipples. Gums grasped the nipples and sucked greedily, steadily, rhythmically. In and out. In and out. Until the teat was drained and air whistled

in the tubes. Everywhere, all over all of the cities, lizard tongues flicked out to scoop up dribbles. Last food was served.

With Peter at her elbow, inconspicuously helping her out over any difficult bits, Dee prepared a superb last food for them. Peter had put a light white wine in the fridge and had lit the candles on the small table, near the window.

The frozen fillets of sole had been gently poached, with the slices of lobster set atop them. A thick coat of mornay sauce followed by the whole contents of a packet of lobster butter poured slowly over the fish, then the whole thing placed in the micro-wave oven to brown. While that was going on, Dee had opened the packet of pommes frites allumettes, ready cut up to three millimetres wide and sixty millimetres long, and dropped them into the copper pan of hot fat. The frozen french beans were bubbling happily in the small saucepan and the tin of petits pois à la bonne femme was simmering on the other ring.

'This is a real cordon bleu meal, Dee, isn't it?'

'Just a minute, love. Yes, it is. Cordon bleu means the best, doesn't it?'

'Well, it means a blue ribbon meal, and that's the very best. Mmmm, smell that sauce. Tell you what; go and sit down and have a glass of wine and I'll finish it off, get everything out and ready. Then, I'll bring it in. It's time I served you a meal for a change. You're always sweating away in the kitchen all day. I'll serve you for a change. Go on now.'

He patted her on her bottom, and pushed her out into the living room. She sat down in the chrome chair and poured out a glass of the clear white wine into the goblet. She ran it round her fingers, marvelling at the smoothness and cold of the crystal. She sipped at it, feeling it smooth across her palate, cool into her throat. The shadows from the candles flickered and danced into the corners of the room, bouncing light back off the brass frames of the Hogarth reproductions. It was a warm, comfortable house, designed to be lived in by a family. Packed with the latest gadgets for ease and leisure.

Space, light, comfort. Something nagged at the back of Dee's mind. Some time, maybe when she had been a child, she was sure that she hadn't always . . .

Peter interrupted her train of thought by bringing in the trolley, laden with steel chafing dishes. Bowing with mock servility, he stood beside her and helped her to huge portions of the delicious food. The firm white flesh of the sole, the crisp potatoes, the tang of the beans and the tiny peas, with shreds of onion and ham. They ate in silence, preoccupied only with the food and the wine.

For dessert, after the sybaritic excess of the main course, Peter brought in the simplest of fruits. Two magnificent grosse mignonne peaches, ripened to perfection, cut in half and stoned. Dee bit through the soft, purplish skin, into the firm white flesh. Juice, sweet and melting ran down her chin and over her white skin, into the valley between her breasts. Peter made her giggle by leaping to his feet and coming round the table, opening the front of her shift dress and licking up the sticky liquid, nuzzling his tongue under her chin and, finally, kissing her hard.

'Only one drink to follow peaches, and that's Southern Comfort. You remember how much you like it, Dee?'

The meal had been so rich and so filling, that Dee didn't think she had any room for a drop more of anything and she told Peter so. She was surprised that he seemed so upset, and pressed her to try this drink. It didn't seem that important, and she told him so.

'No, of course it's not that important, but we always share this particular drink after we've had a nice meal, and I can't see why we still shouldn't. Now, come on love. Just to please me.'

'I'm sorry, darling, but I just don't feel a bit like it. I'm absolutely full up. You have one.'

'No. I won't have one unless you have one as well. Honestly, Dee, don't spoil what's been such a lovely day . . . it has been a nice day, hasn't it? Well then. There? Now I've poured it out you just have to drink it.'

Still Cordelia refused. And Peter got really angry, which was something she'd never seen before. He even went as far

as to threaten her. Or, it seemed as though he had been about to threaten her, when he suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and fell silent. There was a pause of nearly a minute when he didn't speak, then he dropped the subject and started talking about the garden. The drink that he'd poured out for her remained untouched.

For the next hour or so, Peter made every effort to remove the unease that still lay between them. He played music and read to her—silly little poems and bits of things to cheer her up. Gradually, the tension crept away from them, and Dee found herself lying across her husband's lap on the sofa, listening to what he had told her was a symphony called the 'New World'.

Quite unexpectedly, as the music ended, Peter sat up and walked over to the dining table. The plates were still left there from their sumptuous last food, though the candles were guttering to the end of their brief lives. He picked up the full glass of liqueur and carried it over to where Dee lay.

'It's getting very late, and you really must have a nice drink to help you to sleep.'

She pushed the glass away, spilling some of the heavy amber liquid on the floor. 'Peter, will you take that stuff away. If you're worried about me sleeping, then why don't we go straight to bed now.' She touched him tenderly. 'Come on. I'm ready for bed. Ready for some more of your love to finish off the day.'

She blushed at her own forwardness.

He knocked her hand aside with an angry gesture. 'You must drink it! You must drink it!! You must drink it!!!'

Dee shrank back from his shouting rage; the blood ran from her face, leaving it as pale as parchment. 'Peter. Quiet, you'll wake . . .' in her anxiety she couldn't even remember their names, ' . . . the children. Please love. It doesn't matter. Let's go and look at the children. Come on.'

She reached out and tried to take his arm, but he just stood there, the fight drained from him, impassive and still.

'It's no good. Not now. It's too late. Let her go.'

The voice was different. Not like Peter's. Flatter, with less roundness to it. A cold, impersonal voice. And who was 'her'? Dee ran towards the stairs with a steel claw gripping her heart. She burst into the children's room, slamming the door back so it chipped the wall-paper. Bright paper, patterned with designs of space-ships interwoven with grinning dinosaurs.

The room was quiet. Dee stopped at the foot of their bunk beds, trying to still her own heart, fluttering in her breast like a caged dove. Not a sound except for the quiet breathing of the children. The shouting from downstairs hadn't woken them. Dee smiled tremulously and walked back to the door, pausing to listen again to the regular rhythm of their breathing.

Which had stopped!

Completely!

She shook her head disbelievingly. Ran to their beds and leaned over their sleeping forms and strained her ears. Nothing.

Mewing to herself in shock she pulled the blankets off the figure in the top bunk. It was the boy. The boy. His body lay quite still, eyes closed, arms lying loosely at his sides. Dee picked him up, cradled him in her arms, shook him, kissed him, stroked his cool cheeks, laid him back on the rumpled pillow.

Cried.

The girl, Belle, in the lower bunk, was the same. No movement. No breath. No life.

Dee mumbled incoherently to herself as she half-fell down the stairs, grabbing at the bannisters, her nails splitting and tearing to the bloody quick. She slipped as she ran into the living-room and then stopped. Peter stood silently facing half away from her. His eyes were glazed and screened and he seemed to be communing with himself.

'Peter! Peter, they're dead! Can you hear me? The children. They're both dead.'

Slowly the android—a perfect human—turned to look

towards her, but did not see her. Gazing over her head it said quickly, its voice so soft and dull that it hardly stirred the air: 'Over. End. Self-terminate.'

And that was all.

The men came in their clean red fibro-plas coats and took her firmly by the arm. Pressed a small vial to her arm and squeezed a plunger with a barely audible hiss. Held her as she slipped into a sleep. Of sorts. Answered her last question: 'Because you didn't take drink. Sorry.'

Then they took her back to the room. With its muted pastel walls. And its standard grey rest unit. And they attached her again. Where she could sleep and dream.

High. Binomial eyes clicked. A light film of thinnest oil eased tumblers. On the control panels, dazzling arrays of changing colours—a rainbow of reaction. On the master board, wheels danced and numbers flashed. At last the digits slowed, settled became finite. The selection was made. For that part of that day in that part of the city. High.

MURDERS

by

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

When is a murder not a murder? Just how much real non-reality can a mind take, particularly when the privacy of this non-reality no longer remains inviolate? The precedents here seem secure enough; but reality sets shifting confusion beneath them, giving the legal aspects many opportunities for tortuous appraisal, and striking uncertain reflections from our own secret motivations. The word maird as used here by Ramsey Campbell should not be confused with the French word of similar sound.

MURDERS

ONE

'ALL RIGHT, Mounth,' I said. 'I hope you're ready to die.'

The point of my knife pursued him as if he were magnetic north. Light touched the edge, then spilled across the blade. Mounth had retreated towards the back of Holoshows Studios, until an angle of the wall arrested his shoulders. As he made a timid attempt to scurry free I closed in, and he was crucified and quivering against the walls, and I felt the knife light on my fingers as it sailed forward for the first easy incision, and I noticed that the white walls against which Mounth was pressed were vividly lit. But it was supposed to be night. I tried to ignore the error, but my sense of it wouldn't let me alone. Maird, I swore, and began to reconceive. Without distractions I would have just about enough time.

'All right, Mounth,' I said. 'I hope you're ready to die.'

He was squeezing himself back between the walls. It was dark, and darker within the angle, so that I couldn't see his face. Maird, I thought, maird. Then I heard Thaw getting into his car behind me. Its beam wavered a little, then snapped into place as a frame around Mounth. Thaw sat watching, appreciatively smiling, as I began to open Mounth up with the knife. Mounth's squeals urged me on, but his blood seemed too bright, no doubt because I'd seen little of the real thing, and there wasn't much of it, though my mind would have rejected profusion: indeed, had done so. I finished murdering him and stepped down from my throne, feeling rather disappointed, a minute before they switched off the power.

I stood in the centre of my apartment, gazing at the pastel

rainbow whorls and curlicues of the walls, wondering whether Mounth knew I'd been killing him. Probably not, since he was involved in the first of what he'd assured us were the most important shows of his career. Anyway, I didn't care. I glanced at the holocast receivers pointing down into the corner of the room and thought of finding out what Mounth was saying. But I wouldn't; I kept my nights free from Holoshows completely free. And all because of Mounth, I thought. He was the latest and by far the worst of our troubles.

I switched off the windowframes. Activating them had been the product of habit; nobody was ever burgled on the fifteen-mile level, few people were burgled at all. But the government insisted we made ourselves safe during throne-time, so that nobody could accuse them of promoting crime. Nobody except Mounth.

I gazed from the window. At night you might as well be on the viewless ground level as on the fifteen-mile, and even during the day you could seldom see as far as that. I looked down towards the windows of the ten- and twelve-milers, bright discs and polygons set in implicit unseen planes of darkness, their total composition occasionally shifting minutely. I wondered how many people had felt compelled by guilt or fear to watch Mounth's holocast and to forego their thrones. I wondered again if he'd felt me murdering him. I would know tomorrow, I felt vulnerability and triumph swiftly mingling, and my mind retreated to the time before Mounth.

Not that Holoshows had ever been free of troubles. What is? Even the initial advertising of the new experience had fumbled somewhat, largely because the board hadn't wanted the public to dismiss Holoshows as just another disappointment hiding behind the images of an advertising cartel. Tridi was losing huge amounts of cash and credibility to its image, and the inevitable rise in fees was losing it subscribers by the thousand. Holoshows didn't intend to go that way, and we had created our own advertising. But for a while that threatened us as much as it sold. Except you can't touch it, it's solid, we said, and the tridi newscasts grabbed

themselves interviewees who said they could see their apartment floor through a perfect holocaust—but only by concentrating on one spot for more than an hour, as we eventually discovered and pointed out. If you walk into it you'll harm the holocaust, not your health, we said belatedly as the tridis began interviewing mothers who thought their children were being lured into a deadly laser beam (instead of our harmless-for-half-an-hour variety). Our holocausts can't talk but you'll never know, we said to the people the tridis prompted to complain when they found they had to buy speakers as well as receivers and holocaust cube. But: she's young, she's pretty, you can't touch but she doesn't mind what else, we said and had a rush of censorious good taste only just before the government did.

I shouldn't say 'we' about that period, but I feel it. I was working for tridis then. When their sniping at Holoshows became embarrassing, and the ridiculousness of their attacks clear to everyone but themselves, I went to direct for Holoshows. I'd worked out new techniques of tridi editing and camera handling, and now I translated these into holocaust terms. Ego break: until I came they hadn't even thought of taking the holocameras 360° around anything, let alone how. But my experiments were all formal. They didn't risk offending the government.

The government: they were our main trouble, or—more accurately—threat. They were teetering between the extremes of their two parties. They would touch an extreme and spark off a bill, then a year later to nobody's surprise they might ratify an almost direct contradiction. Work together, hurt nobody and the rest of your time within your own walls is your own; improve yourself, improve the worlds for your children, without help the future's always worse than now. Of course there was more than that to the parties, but it was often impossible to see what. Which made it especially difficult for Holoshows.

It sometimes amazed us how much we achieved. Our more blatant victories owed all to Thaw's strategy. Thaw was resident lawyer at Holoshows. Like most successful

lawyers he'd been trained as a psychologist, and there was a whole psychological method in the way he used his stick as pointer, hinted threat, symbol of imminent victory, distracting pendulum as well as a third leg. But his gaunt frame and almost bone-tight skin, refusing wrinkles, were the emblems of decades of experience. It was Thaw, for example, who meditated a compromise on the holocasting of violence. Not that the majority of the government felt that the emulation of holocasts was consistent enough to be legislated for. No, the psychological effect we were accused of producing was subtler: a sort of vague domestic schizophrenia in which people felt dimly caged by apathy, the effect of violence transmitted so persuasively that it became indistinguishable from the real within one's walls. No use our asking why violence, nor our pointing out that the squirts of always slightly unconvincing studio blood vanished in midair (accurately, at the surface of the holostage cube). All we could do was transmit a bright coloured outline to the cube itself when violence was imminent and wait for cancellations to arrive from, in the literal sense, disillusioned subscribers.

'If you can stand realizing your best isn't always good enough,' Thaw once said to me, 'you'll survive anything life can throw at you.'

He might have been talking about the violence box, as we called the outlined cube, but in fact it was a year later and we'd had worse trouble: indeed, our earlier trouble in purest crystal form. The wife of the Minister for Media had left the room during one of our drama holocasts, and had returned to find a yard-high slightly drooping breast squatting in the corner of the room, the vision of a young holocameraman turned briefly avant-garde director. Arriving home minutes later to find his wife in hysterics, the minister called Emergency Power Control and talked quietly and coldly until they'd cut the domestic entertainments supply for hundreds of miles around the capital. Then: a commission of inquiry, threats of prosecution to half the staff at Holoshows.

Thaw took one glance at the robed bodies of the elderly women who were more than half of the commission and

said that the holocaust had been meant to express the director's sense of beauty. But meanwhile the minister's wife had wobbled on the edge of a breakdown, and (perhaps from an alarming and astonishingly single-minded sympathy) the majority of the government had upheld the minister's action. Tridis had embraced puritanism and sunk, but we were doing little better as our subscribers relinquished a medium which could be put out of action at whim. Everyone at Holoshows, even Thaw, was chasing the tail of depression.

Then Mounth arrived and offered a telepath show.

Telepath shows had been briefly in fashion some decades ago. They'd been burdened with titles such as the Tridi Telepath Talkshow but these weren't the main reason why they'd died. So you could watch a perfect tridi of someone talking to guests whose evasions he could read: so? Hardly anyone became involved enough to sue. And when someone did, the law established that while unauthorized telepathy was still illegal, assuming the user was stupid enough to make it obvious, anyone who appeared on a telepath show had authorized telepathy by so doing. That decision was worth a few seconds at the end of a tridi newscast, and when the telepath shows were quietly faded, soon after, it was generally agreed that what they'd needed had been far more purpose and force. Mounth had a great deal of both.

I was at Holoshows the day he was interviewed. I saw him stride into Reception, smile warmly but without familiarity at our receptionist, sit his lumberjack frame like a clear-cut sharply pointed statement on one of Reception's stools, hold his open alert face up to anyone who passed, eager to be called to speak.

It was then I was convinced for the first time that the old sour belief about telepaths was true: that they adjusted their image each time they felt someone's opinion of them, until they'd perfected it. I didn't see him go in, but in another corridor I met the interview board on their way, their faces saying last resort, try anything, what have we come to, and Thaw's reiterating his favourite maxim that you can't afford

to lose hope until whatever it is has been proved hopeless. He held up a lazy finger to confirm we would talk in an hour.

In fact it was closer to two, and while Thaw was telling me the interview was already becoming legend at Holoshows. Especially Mounth's final speech: 'You, sir, you're wondering if the people can identify with a telepath, even one who's fighting for their rights,' he said. 'I think they can if he's fighting as hard as I will. And you, sir, think that I couldn't keep it up for long. But there's a lot wrong with our world, and I think we should give people the chance to see it all. And you suspect my motives because I used to earn so much as a salesman. But I had to earn money before I could do what I should be doing, if only to give my parents a real home. And you' (who was Thaw) 'think I can influence you into hiring me. I can't, I'm not that sort of telepath, which is why I have to be honest. I can't avoid reading what you think about me but I could have avoided admitting it to you. I've been honest and you can show me the door if you wish. But there's no use my avoiding honesty and truth, because they're what my show will be based on if you let me have it. You've said yourselves that today people won't let advertising play with them in any way. I'm sure you'll agree that it's still truth that sells.'

'That man's trouble,' Thaw said to me. 'There's no way of telling them that, without looking as if I'm trying to cheat Holoshows of their last chance. But I for one shall be watching him very carefully.'

Two

WATCHING the early, weekly, editions of Truthlight I began to feel that Thaw had allowed himself to be piqued by Mounth's reading of him. That was the period in which Mounth was challenging cartel bosses. He eased in his chat, probing gently and levering open his victim all the way back to a tiny original motivation, perhaps buried deep in a disowned childhood episode, which Mounth would pull forth

writhing, shameful and banal. Only then would he slam in the errors which he'd known his victim hoped he wouldn't mention. 'See you in six months,' Mounth would say. 'I know then you'll be able to talk to me and the people as friends.'

'There's nothing you can't reduce to an origin which is trivial or disgraceful, if you try hard enough,' Thaw said to him after one Truthlight show. 'It seems to me the point is what's achieved, not where it came from.'

'I know appearances are your job,' Mounth said, 'but they're not the same thing as truth.'

I was inclined to agree with him. In the six months he gave them, most of the bosses improved things for their subsidiaries, their employees, often for the public too. Most of them now always masked themselves with secretaries, but that was surely a small price for them to pay. A few improved nothing and blustered publicly about attempted brainwashing; but they were the first to discover that those who refused Mounth's invitations were announced on each Truthlight until they gave in. No use anyone saying he had nothing publicly significant to disclose, as Mounth listed the investors, and the investments began to be hastily if apologetically pulled away by vaguely threatened consciences. 'If it's me you object to,' Mounth said into the holocamera as the names he was addressing snapped into a frame behind his head, 'I imagine the government would arrange for you to be examined by a social telepath.' There were smiles of appreciation in the studio at that, and one of them was mine.

I was particularly pleased when he took on the social telepaths themselves. Yes, I knew that the reason he could line up four of them to interview in the studio was that the government didn't dare forbid them to appear; Mounth was already as powerful as that.

'Don't look so uneasy, Thaw,' I said. 'The government never did much for us.' But he was frowning at Mounth addressing the telepaths from within his almost invisible protective cube, on which a few of his interviewees had thumped wildly.

'Of course we all know that the only thing we mustn't do within our own walls is harm,' Mounth was saying. 'And we know that one of your jobs is defining and preventing harm. It's a difficult job and I know we all admire those who do it well. But outside our own walls it's up to us all to be vigilant. Now I gather a few of the poorer people not a hundred miles north of here have been soliciting. It's quite illegal, of course, and I'm sure we'd agree with the government that nobody's so poor that it's necessary. It's the sort of thing that might make a sentimental person disobey government rules,' his gaze settling on the trapped expression of a telepath which the holocamera didn't catch, 'but I shouldn't be surprised if I didn't even have to mention it again.'

'I've seen the people on the north side,' Thaw said to me, 'and even when Holoshows were at their worst those people made me feel like a millionaire.'

Me too, but I didn't say that; I said 'I'll admit he could have carried his economic redistribution a bit further before starting this.'

'One of these days you'll die of moderation. He'd have to push it a long way further before it took.'

'If Mounth were as dishonest as you want me to believe,' I said, 'the last people he'd challenge would be telepaths.'

Soon Mounth's contract came up for renewal. He didn't want more money; he wanted five shows a fortnight, and he got them. He also wanted me to direct. Most of my work was finding itself in the violence box. I'd felt Mounth's slight pained disapproval and had been distressed, because I respected him enough to identify achievement with his esteem. I agreed to direct Truthlight.

Then he began to extend his range from popular targets and the socially crucial to the accepted and applauded: gardeners, architects, tribalist percussionists. Not that his approach had ever been inflexibly hostile, of course; some of them came out smiling, perhaps even inspired. But more came out gripping their expressions as if they were the only part of them left unshaken, and probably they were.

The worst case was Clement, the lightpainter. 'And this is a copy of your most famous work,' Mounth said to him. 'It's

been manufactured frequently. I'd like you to take another look at it with us. This long thin beam going in between these two round pink areas: now what are these? They have a kind of soft rather motherly quality, wouldn't you say? And why does this little jagged ray keep trying to escape? I'm sure you can tell us, but let me help.'

After that it became unbearable, and at last Clement walked out of the studio with nobody behind his eyes. Mounth saw my disquiet or perhaps he felt it, for he was looking at me when he said 'We mustn't be too ready to call things beautiful. Real beauty's beautiful all the way through.' I stopped my head nodding and determined to wait until I knew how Clement had been affected.

Others were quicker to condemn Mounth. Although, or perhaps because, Truthlight had the highest ratings in the career of holocausts or of tridi for that matter, every show was pelted with calls and letters of censure, anger, hatred. Mounth ignored the anonymous but often read out and answered the most pointed of the rest, complete with names and addresses, after his interviews. Then one accusation began to recur: that he was extending the range of his interviews so as not to run out of targets rather than from honest feeling. This time he was hurt and he asked me to help him answer.

We took the holocameras into the north side. Exteriors were still appallingly expensive, but Holoshows agreed this once.

Mounth stood among the rubblegardens which the gardeners had constructed to unify the environment. I had the holocameras watch some children collecting plastic bottles and cans to build a rubbush outside their five-miler, then turned them back to Mounth.

'When I lived here it wasn't a garden,' he said. 'We didn't build with rubble, we hurt each other with it. Over there is where I broke someone's hand with a stone because he wouldn't share his beer with me. And just there under the five-miler is where I thought I'd discovered what sex was about, all sweat and blood and haste and sharp bits of stone. I'm better than I was but I've a long way to go, and I want

you all go there with me. Someday I'll get married, but not until I'm worthy to. Tell me my feelings don't make sense, then tell me what else does. We all want improvement, it doesn't matter what our politics are. That's why I do what I do.' As the holocameras returned to the children waiting for the adhesive on the bush to set I realized that Mounth hadn't been using his body or his image at all. He had answered with pure honest faith.

For the rest of his answer we took the next Truthlight to see his parents. We began at their front door. Everyone has a personal front door and a lift behind it, of course, but few have their own maintenance man living on the next level down. I posed Mounth's parents against the window and a clear twenty-five miles, and I was about to instruct the holocameras to track when I saw Mounth looking at me, and I realized that if anyone was falsifying to make a point it was I.

'I'm disappointed and a little hurt,' he said. 'You still don't quite believe my answers.' Maird, I said, silently, and effaced myself and let the holocameras gaze at his parents: chafing a little against each other but largely calm and self-contained, somewhat bemused by all the technicians, a little bewildered still after two years by their new demandingly clean and tidy home. 'This was the first thing I wanted to achieve, and the easiest,' was all Mounth said.

But it wasn't long after that I first looked up and frowned. While the attacks on him became more vicious, the letters and calls of support multiplied. More than one pleaded with him to interview the only group he'd consistently avoided, the government.

'I've pledged myself not to interfere in politics,' he said. 'To do so would be to interfere with democracy. So I can't lead you in that area, at least not directly. But I hope I don't have to. I hope' (and Thaw mirrored my frown and nodded) 'you've learned from me.'

Then, almost as if responding to Mounth's implicit challenge, the government produced thrones.

Perhaps their inventor was a government man. If he

wasn't he must have been shrewd, for he forestalled any battle with the government's arbitrary puritanism by selling the throne direct to them. Which meant monopoly; but since the throne wasn't a medium in the strict sense the government couldn't be accused of using it for dictatorial purposes.

What the throne was, nobody outside the manufacturing process knew. The workers were gagged by the secrets act; the thrones were on hire to subscribers and mustn't be tampered with on pain of prosecution; the power source was concealed and government-controlled, switched on for a quarter of an hour each evening and otherwise apparently dormant except as an alarm system to betray those who tried to dismantle their thrones. We were reassured that the thrones were physically and mentally harmless. After initial widespread distrust we confirmed the statement for ourselves, and discovered what the thrones did.

Imagine: anything. The thrones made that both an offer and an equation. Sit in your throne, pull the crown forward on its arm and cap your skull with it and there it is, surrounding you and solid: your imagination. It's as though all your senses have become eidetic, and that's as close as you'll come to understanding what you're doing. Don't drift, because if you lose control you'll only be disappointed; construct your quarter of an hour toward a climax and you'll feel enriched, not disillusioned, when you take off the crown. Don't look for advertising; listen to your friends who've tried it.

So we did, and the government thrived, and Mounth disapproved. 'If you want to ignore what's wrong with the world now's your chance,' he said. 'Don't change it, just make a world for yourself. But that world's a selfish world and you shut other people out. I don't even want to think how many people must look at their wife or their husband wearing a crown, and wonder. You won't let yourselves be seduced by advertising, haven't you the will not to be seduced by yourselves?'

I'd been one of the first to hire a throne; I knew Mounth believed what he was saying but that didn't mean he was

right all the time. This was too large an issue even for him, I thought, he would have to content himself with comment and with the support of those who agreed with him.

I didn't delude myself long. First we fought the thrones for ratings. Holoshows would have asked him if he hadn't suggested it to them, and so Truthlight was moved to overlap both sides of thronetime. Somehow Mounth arranged for the first set of ratings to reach him before anyone else saw them; but we all knew what they showed when Mounth strode out of Holoshows, looking at nobody. Not all the audience he lost when the thrones were about to be switched on even bothered to return to Truthlight when thronetime was over.

Then he seemed to resign himself to the attitude I'd predicted, though from the first I was disturbed by the way he did so. On the next Truthlight he didn't have a victim; he read out attacks and answered them, and seemed to be dawdling until thronetime. But there was a tension, a sense that he was delaying for some reason. A minute before thronetime he began to stare silently at the chronometer. We and the holocameras gazed at him. Thronetime clicked into place and he turned to the holocameras.

'Now I can talk to all of you who believe we have free will and that it's worth having,' he said. 'Now the others aren't listening. I think they must be the ones who tell us no murder is premeditated.'

'And he's talking maird if he contradicts them,' Thaw said in my ear.

'Well, perhaps they're right and we've taken care of that problem,' Mounth said. 'Let's leave aside those of you who are old or alone and wouldn't care if they were premeditated, shall we? And let's look at something everyone seems to have forgotten. If premeditated murders became common, if murder became an everyday activity, then the tension that produced them wouldn't be high enough for the social telepaths to track down. There'd be only one way to stop them, as there used to be, and that's the death penalty. Don't say anything yet,' he said. 'Think about it. And if you think this is just a fantasy of mine, I may surprise you.'

'All the evidence shows there are fewer murders now the thrones are channelling tension,' Thaw told him when he'd finished. And the social telepaths prevented most of the rest, reading emotional tensions unauthorized, by one of those inconsistencies without which no society functions. It was a job in which they could use their talents, and one in which they could feel disliked for what they did rather than what they were: preventing violence by talkouts based on telepathic readings, and if necessary by hypnotic sessions involving a panel of four, popularly regarded as the evil tamperer and the others not seeing, hearing, admitting what he was about. I suddenly realized that Mounth's faith in himself had borne him above and past that sort of work without a glance.

'Fewer murders, are there?' he said to Thaw. 'In that case you needn't worry how my hypothetical murders are punished.'

In the next few days his method began to pay off, perhaps even more spectacularly than he'd anticipated. Letters and calls of support mounted and toppled off his desk, and all from people who'd been crowned during Truthlight but now were angrily demonstrating their free will. Mounth smiled slightly each time he returned to his desk from reading our files on the government. I had no idea what he was planning, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be involved.

THREE

WHEN Mounth acted nobody had a chance to anticipate. I was just one of the audience, gazing and gaping as he listed the ministers, all the most personally unattractive members of the government, who'd been murdered by their secretaries and aides during the past fortnight's thronetimes.

'I hardly need to be more honest, but I shall be,' he said. 'I watched most of these murders happen, and I had no authority to do so. But our government has never punished unauthorized telepathy when it's been used in the service of the law. If I misjudged and must be punished, then I accept.'

But,' he said with wide-eyed innocence to the holocameras, 'in that case our government must accept that these murders are the purest harmless fantasy and do nothing about them.'

When some of those he'd named were demoted he ignored them; he was sure of himself. Once our reporters had established that three of the aides had been dismissed, Mounth pounced.

'I was going to suggest that these people could be examined by social telepaths, but now it seems I needn't,' he said. 'The government lawyers say they want to talk to me about my behaviour. I've said of course they can, here on Truthlight in front of us all. I believe there's a question we all want to ask them. Something on these lines: if these murders aren't a serious matter why have these people been dismissed? If even the government's as worried as that, what are we supposed to do? Not knowing if we've been murdered, is that supposed to reassure us? Do they want us to say never mind, it isn't real? Haven't they been telling us it's absolutely real, isn't that the whole appeal of it? Then where's the law in all this. Is it pretending not to notice? We can't dismiss our murderers, haven't we ordinary people the right to demand protection?'

At the side of my eye Thaw's face turned and loomed at me. I met his expression, for we both knew that Mounth was taking an extraordinary chance in describing himself that way. I saw in Thaw's eyes, and felt moving uneasily in my mind, a sudden conviction that he would succeed.

'Aren't we entitled to ask that these murders are stopped in the only way that works?' Mounth said. 'Are you thinking you don't need protection? How do you know? I can't be sure, can you? Wouldn't you rather know you're safe? If you agree don't call, don't write. Think it to me. Think it now.' And in millions of rooms his smile slowly grew and warmed and embraced his audience.

I didn't direct the first of the Truthlights on the law. A trainee director took over on my free nights, and was overwhelmed by the chance to handle such material. Before the show began I wandered into the studio to make sure no

technical disasters were threatening. Thaw, whom Holo-shows had self-protectively asked to mediate, was making his way to the stage. I was wishing him good luck when a reporter looked in to give us the news. Mounth had foregone his protective cube as a gesture to the lawyers, and was waiting at the back of the studio to walk on and face the panel.

We closed in on him. 'Clement, the artist you broke down,' I said. 'He's killed himself.'

'He would have in any case. He had a death-wish.'

'I don't think so,' I said.

'It was in his work and I read it in him. He destroyed what he couldn't bear. Truth does that to some people, I'm afraid.'

When I arrived home thronetime had just started, and I sat in my throne and murdered Mounth.

And next morning I was entering my office when Thaw caught up with me. 'Someone murdered Mounth last night,' he said. 'At least, they did until he felt them doing it. It's all recorded. Come and see.'

I followed him, not caring. I thought he was being unnecessarily oblique in breaking the news to me, but perhaps he hoped to convert me to his view of Mounth. If so he hardly needed bother; Mounth would have me dismissed in no time. I sat on a stool in the playback room, beneath the first words of IF YOU VISITED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE YESTERDAY DON'T YOU THINK YOU SHOULD SEE HOW YOU LOOKED, and Mounth opened from a bud of light in mid-air before me, melting a little at the edges until the recording stabilized.

Long before the murder I was watching numbly, knowing Mounth had won against the lawyers.

'If you murder someone and a clone is immediately produced with the identical personality of your victim and total continuity, you're still guilty of murder, not attempted murder,' he said. 'That's not a hypothesis, it's a preventive legal precedent which was established to anticipate the event. If you killed the clone you would be guilty of murder

in that instance too, that was also established. But this means that in law if you kill something indistinguishable from a human victim you are guilty of murder. And the whole point about the throne experience is to make it indistinguishable from reality. If that's the case it must be so in law as well. I suppose it's too late to ask the government to switch off all the thrones and repossess them. But the least they must do is retain the social telepaths to be sensitive enough to anticipate these murders.'

'Where's he getting all this?' I said.

'Look at his face, look at the strain,' Thaw said, poking his stick at Mounth's nose. 'He was using us on the panel as a pool. There was nothing we could have done about it short of getting up and leaving, because if we'd challenged him to quote the references he'd been reading he would simply have picked them out from behind the question. Now look, here it comes, the murder.'

Mounth was staring directly at me, smiling with a triumph so confident it hardly bothered to smile. 'Excuse me a moment. There's someone out there getting ready to murder me,' he said. 'A young man called, now let me find his name, Harri Sams. Why is he doing that, I wonder? Ah, because his mother watches Truthlight and because he's heard me saying he won't be able to do exactly what he likes. I don't think he's going to succeed. No, he's off the throne. Thank you, Mrs. Sams, that's right, you keep him away from it. Sorry I had to bring you the news, but I'm sure you can handle it.'

Thaw was watching me. 'Nothing occurs to you about all that?' he said.

'No, nothing.'

'Good. Then do me just one favour. Don't think about it. Wait and see.'

I didn't intend to think about it; I was too busy thinking of anything my mind could grab that didn't relate to Mounth and the possibility that he'd felt me murdering him. I had a grim suspicion that he might make that revelation and my dismissal one of the high points of tonight's show. Or maybe he'd been too preoccupied with Sams. Taking the

hint from that hope, I preoccupied myself with explaining to last night's trainee that the secret of directing Truthlight was to be unobtrusive, even static; he'd been so drawn to Mounth's enthusiasm that toward the end of the show Mounth's head had swelled and sat decapitated in millions of homes, addressing an invisible panel. Then I filled myself with setting up tonight's show and with the fact that since last night's had been more successful than even Mounth had expected, this one would be merely a rerun for the less intelligent and for those who'd been crowned during last night's. Mounth rested in his office and read the response of his supporters. I'd heard that the simplest preoccupations were the best proof against telepaths.

Tell me that day lasted less than a year, the clock told me so but I didn't believe it. Every so often I felt rising to the surface of my mind like the threat of a deafening belch the growing desire to go and tell Mounth I knew he knew I'd killed him, and I would chatter faster and louder to the technicians until it went away. We set up the holocameras so as to contain Mounth and the panel, and placed another pair on standby in case we should need to cut to an emergency setup (always disconcerting in a live holocast: a sudden blurring into a cube of light, then behind the walls of light the figures have shifted). Then the panel began to arrive, and we waited for Mounth.

Mounth strode onto the stage as the Truthlight theme rang out, a two-bar determinedly rising theme on baritone steel drums, and we knew what sort of show it wasn't going to be. As the lawyers had taken their places I'd hoped they might have produced some answers overnight, but their expressions were those of a cast repeating a dismal rehearsal. Only Thaw had his keep-hoping look, and I felt this had more to do with his philosophy than with the situation. Everyone in Holoshows was watching the show, but they'd already accepted there would be no surprises. This was just a recapitulation before the lawyers were called in to talk by the government, then Truthlight would abandon the theme unless Mounth's arguments were denied. The audience

which had been persuaded by last night's Truthlight switched this one off after the first few minutes.

'Even within your own walls you mustn't do harm,' Mounth was saying when I began to hear the Truthlight theme. Bom bom, bom *bam*. At first I thought it had crept into my head uninvited, then as it grew a little less faint I realized it was somewhere in the building. Perhaps someone was playing back last night's Truthlight to catch Mounth in a contradiction.

'They try to tell us there are fewer murders with the thrones,' Mounth said. 'But we can see that exactly the opposite is true.' He was ignoring the Truthlight theme, which was repeating like a cramped recording loop and growing louder, loud enough to be picked up by the holocast. One of the off-duty audience moved toward the studio door.

'On the contrary, people who would never have thought of murder are now being encouraged to try it and take it for granted,' Mounth said, and I suddenly realized that the theme wasn't only growing louder, it was actually approaching. More than that, an aggressive rather desperate quality was gaining on it, betraying that it was the sound of a human voice. As I realized that, the studio doors were thrown open and in he came, singing.

He was a young man, fashionably-bald head shining, his eyes gazing at Mounth and brighter still. He strode up the studio aisle, roaring the Truthlight theme. An oddmind, I thought, struggling to squeeze my face shut against laughter. Let someone else throw him out, I'm the director. I signalled the cameramen not to cut. As I did so Mounth shouted 'Sams!' and grabbed Thaw's stick and hurled it at the young man.

The heavy end of the stick whipped round and struck Sams between the eyes. He fell. And I'd turned to call cut when I saw Thaw's face as he leapt.

He'd levered himself painfully but swiftly to his feet behind Mounth. And as if his face were a frame three expressions fell into place just separate enough not to be simultaneous: astonishment, comprehension, decision. Sams had fallen just within the transmitted holostage, but only his

back as far down as his hips would be visible to the audience unless they were morbid enough to crawl round for a closer look. Thaw launched himself from his stool and fell short of Sams. He dragged himself rapidly across the stage on hands and knees—I'd never seen him move so fast—and slipped his hand beneath Sams' chest. 'He's dead,' he said, and his hand came out displaying a knife.

'He had a knife,' Mounth said.

'We've all seen that,' Thaw said before Mounth's lips had finished moving.

'He was singing to cover his thoughts. He was going to kill me.'

'Were you in his mind?'

'Only just in time.'

'Were you in anyone else's mind?'

'What? No, of course not.'

'Not in mine?'

'Why should I have needed to be?'

'If you weren't,' Thaw said, and his words were following Mounth's so closely they seemed to be attached and Mounth's mind couldn't move ahead of or through them, 'how did you know my stick was behind you to reach for?'

A cameraman gestured to me for authority to cut. I shook my head furiously, and Thaw pulled himself up with his stick.

'Why did you throw my stick?' he said, riding the pause and forcing the pace faster.

'I knew he had a knife.'

'So did we at the time you mentioned it.'

'Only because you were so quick.'

'Weren't you a bit quick to kill him?'

'To stop him killing me. I know everyone else can see that.'

'Remember Clement?' Thaw said, and I wondered how long he could juggle faster than Mounth could follow.

'Of course I do.'

'The artist you said killed himself because he had a death-wish?'

'That's true. He had.'

'I think if anyone has a death-wish you have.'

'I can see what you're doing!' Mounth cried, and suddenly so could I, but Thaw's voice was on top of him.

'You spend weeks arguing for the death penalty and then you commit a murder that certainly looks premeditated to me. You didn't have to look for my stick. You knew it was Sams coming to spoil your show and you got ready to murder him. It's a complicated way to fulfil your death-wish but that's what it sounds like to me. What does it sound like to everyone else? Do you think he's been trying to get himself executed? Think it to us. Think it now.'

Maybe you've been in a room where someone hates you. Possibly you've experienced a roomful of them. Try to imagine almost instantaneously becoming the focus of millions of people, many of them hating you, many believing that your whole career has been directed at achieving your death, and the rest simply bewildered. That's what Mounth must have felt, for when Holoshows tried to investigate nobody came forward to say they'd supported him. Imagine it, and try to feel it as if you're built on belief in yourself and everyone else's belief in you. Mounth did, and that was why he snatched the knife from Thaw. And then went weak or stumbled? Maybe. And fell on the knife.

And that was when I called cut.

Before the governors dismissed him Thaw told them: 'I didn't think he'd do that. I was being ironic and, yes, I wanted him to experience his role turned against him. But whether or not you like it, Mounth's death wasn't the important point. If Sams would have killed him that proves that if you inhibit thronetime murders you promote the real thing. We have to decide which we prefer. And that's what I'm going to tell the government.'

Now Thaw works for the government. We still meet sometimes, when he holds the government and Holoshows apart. He often insists to me that he didn't intend Mounth to die. Of course persuasion is his job. At any rate, we agree on one point. The ratings showed that as soon as Mounth fell on

the knife almost everyone switched off and didn't wait for me to cut. The experience Mounth had offered was over, and his dying was too realistic and banal. For once we were glad that we hadn't started a trend.

TO THE PUMP ROOM WITH JANE

by

IAN WATSON

The world's climate has undergone radical change in this century and the southerly shifts in weather systems have brought heartbreaking droughts to the Sahel region of the Sahara, the north west of India and the caatinga zone of Brazil. In England where the word 'drought' is being replaced by the euphemism 'rainfall deficiency' we may have sufficient natural water still, despite the 10% reduction in rainfall as compared with a hundred years ago; but we, too, face the prospect of catastrophic water shortage unless and until we understand more fully the mechanics of rainfall cycles and the aberrations of climate. An unbalanced mind sees into life at a different angle from a sane one, and, as this story shows in a drily ironic way, in the empathy of time like would call unto like ...

TO THE PUMP ROOM WITH JANE

THE MORROW brought still another sober-looking day of oppressive warmth, the sun making few efforts to appear through the general grey as though, having already heated the city intolerably, it felt chary of imposing an additional burden upon its inhabitants. Yet, much as Jane dreaded the consequence of all the white glare of buildings upon eyes already sore, she almost would have welcomed this as alternative to the pervasive dirtiness which the haze brought, with the prospect of soiled gown and yashmak, almost as soon as she should set foot in the street below.

'A hundred degrees, I imagine, and ninety of humidity,' sighed her mother. 'We must hope the Pump Room isn't as crowded—'

Jane did not trouble to frame a response, being familiar with her mother's complaints, which naturally had no effect whatever upon the world outside—nor her wishes the slightest prospect of fulfilment. Pavement and Pump Room would contain precisely as great, and oppressive, a pack of people this morning as any other. Crowds of people were every moment passing in and out of the Pump Room; and occupying the pavements with their full, or empty, water hods. Every creature in town was to be seen in the room twice at different periods of the week. How curious, reflected Jane, that some quota hours should have come to seem more fashionable than others. And how distressing, in these circumstances, that her mother and herself should merely *verge* upon a fashionable hour, obliged to desert the Pump Room as they were, straight upon the striking of noon! It made her prospects of an acceptable alliance so much the narrower. Had she only heeded the blandishments of Frederick Wentworth eight years earlier and not been

persuaded to a course of discretion and daughterly solicitude.

'We had best be on our way, dear Jane. It is so far to go; eight hundred yards is a long way in such heat and crowds. Our neighbour Mr. Allen says it is nine, measured nine; but I am sure it cannot be more than eight; and it is such a fag, I come back tired to death.'

'What you say is most true, Mother. I certainly should know,' she added quietly, without enlarging on this topic. Eight years before had seen Jane a passably pretty girl, though her bloom had vanished early, as with any countenance exposed to all the injury of a poisonous atmosphere. At least she grew haggard amidst the wreck of the good looks of everybody else; each face in the neighbourhood worsting. Yet this was small consolation, when she recollected on another manner of life she might have led, amidst the cleaner air to be enjoyed only perhaps by a sea Captain's wife today.

Who, however, could have predicted, eight years earlier, that *he* should rise so far and fast in his profession? And what would have been worse than to be the wife of a mere rating, abandoned eleven twelfths of the year on a rating's pittance—and no happiness but the dream of a husband coming home yearly to the sorry prospect of more visible decay? A life of restricted circumstances on welfare credits was preferable to such degradation of romance.

For it had been a fine flower of romance that bloomed briefly, eight years before—a short period of exquisite felicity, when half the sum of attraction on either side might have sufficed. In truth Jane had respected the bloom on this flower too much to allow herself to be rashly persuaded by him; and so yielded to her mother's own practical, selfish persuasions—yet not for those motives that her mother had imagined. The upshot was that Frederick Wentworth departed her life, believing her weak-willed; without realizing the true force of her will for romance.

Few, however, could have realistically persuaded either mother or daughter eight years earlier, of how truly desolating an eight years' delay could prove to prospects and

features alike—of the sudden inroads of wearisome heat, foul air, and the burgeoning of so many other people; nor how Frederick Wentworth's flimsy expectations should be a thousand times fulfilled and more, by the responsibility of securing fresh water for this thirsty multitude that had been thrust so precipitately on the Admiralty amid the demise of native rivers and streams.

Discreetly (with resignation, with shame, with a pang of anger, quietly checked) Jane had followed his progress in the Navy List, displayed in the Upper Rooms along with other Governmental edicts; hastening thither through the crowd whenever her mother felt equal to the task of waiting in line by herself with their water hods; and Jane could summon up excuses of a sufficiently pressing nature—perhaps once in a three months' or a six months' period.

This was sufficient to acquaint her with his rapid rise to the command of the sea tug *Grappler*, refitted as one of the saviour 'berg tugs that towed the selfsame water in frozen form from Southern Oceans which she and her Mother bore home in hods from the Pump Room.

Scarcely an occasion of bearing her water hod along the crowded pavement passed without her sparing at least one thought for Frederick, now Captain Wentworth; and Captain of no mean vessel, since the 'berg tug was suddenly become as consequential to the Nation's survival, as Admiral Nelson's man of war, and far more consequential than any *Cutty Sark*. Yet she could not expect him to spare one thought for her. Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations—all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past—how natural, how certain too! It included nearly a third part of her own life. Alas! with all her reasonings, she found that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing. *She still thought.*

'We must leave, dear Jane. Oh it is so intolerable a fag, that Pump Room! If only we had not to go there with all these other people we do not know, and would not care to.'

'Perhaps your spirits would be better prepared for the ordeal by a modest tranquillizer?'

Her mother sighed agreement, and Jane fetched the small bottle of yellow glass from the mantelshelf; each woman swallowed her five milligrams; soon they were picking their way down the crowded stairways to the street, the vapours of the stairs assailing their nostrils through the perfumed yashmaks.

Pavements afforded their customary dirty, hot confusion. Along them walked Jane and her mother as swiftly as they might, determined to persevere in disregarding their vile situation of distress, only partly alleviated by the influence of chemistry. Street and pavements alike were thronged with hods being borne empty towards the Pump Room; filled, away; a dense forest of square, transparent boxes upon carrying poles—the innumerable ghosts of empty hat boxes consigned to a Purgatory sadly bereft of millinery.

Thirty minutes conducted them along Union Street to the archway opposite the Pump Yard; but here they were stopped. Anyone acquainted with this town may know the difficulties of crossing Cheap Street at this point; it is indeed a street of an impertinent nature, unfortunately linked to the great Ring Road, therefore bearing all the permitted vehicles in to the multistorey Park. Today they were prevented crossing first by the approach of a soybean convoy; then by a civic entertainments wagon, with musical artists tuning up on drums and guitars in the chilled air behind thick, wired glass, protected as well from the heat as from the assaults of enthusiastic admiration.

'Oh, these odious gigs!' cried her mother; 'how I detest them!' Yet this detestation, though so just, was of short duration, for she looked again, and exclaimed, 'Is that not—? No, it cannot be! I declare the thing to be impossible! Did you glimpse him, Jane? Just then—entering the Pump Room.'

'Who did you glimpse? I confess to have noticed no one of our acquaintance.'

'I suppose it was not he,' she sighed testily; ' 'tis always the

same, looking at everybody and speaking to no one. To know nobody in all this multitude of people! It is intolerable! But who *should* we know, between eleven and twelve o'clock? If our names might only be transferred to the noon hour!

Jane felt inclined to let the topic drop of its own inertia, yet her curiosity was piqued; she pressed; and was tormented with:

'Why, that Mr. Wentworth who presumed on our acquaintance and your affections, some years ago——'

For once, Jane blessed the yashmak that afforded protection against inclement air and vulgar stares at the cost of stifling confinement; since it hid the blush that she may not, herself, have been able to quench.

The thing was impossible!

Finally they succeeded in crossing Cheap Street; pressed into the Pump Room with the general crush; had their names written down in the Pump Room book.

Taking their place among jostling elbows, and jostling hods, the two women pressed slowly forward to where the harvested, melted ice of Antarctica reached its penultimate destination, before being borne like so many pints of finest claret, in the container hods, to hovel and highrise alike.

Twenty minutes' slow exertion, attended by sighs and complaints, brought them to the polished Pump itself, where the Master of Ceremonies bestowed on them the usual small cup each of 'that which cheers, but not inebriates' to quench the thirst of waiting; whilst the hods were filled, sealed, returned to already weary arms, several pounds heavier in burden.

Jane had not believed her mother's eccentric claim; still her heart had fluttered, impertinently.

As they insinuated themselves with the precious hods towards the Pump Room doorway, the clock already pointing to a quarter to twelve, a heavy foot brushed across Jane's ankle; she was too dilatory by half a second in evading it; put out her hands to save herself, and in so doing quite lost hold on her hod.

The horror of that moment! Herself, unbalanced; the water hod, tottering amidst shoulders, elbows, hips, towards imminent collision with the ground. She knew the catch was weak; many feet would soon be knocking against it, even if it did not spill straightaway! And then all must be lost.

She reached for it; she cried out, impotently.

In another moment, however, a man's hand reached past hers. A man's shoulder parted the throng. He seized; grasped the handle by the end; held on by sheer strength till the hod could be restored to equilibrium and returned to her.

She turned to face her rescuer; and experienced such painful agitation she could barely find the necessary words of thanks; even then, she did not realize that he might know who she was, till he responded.

'Miss Jane Elliot? I believe we know each other.'

'Indeed, Captain Wentworth; but how——?' was all that Jane could summon.

'You briefly raised your yashmak to drink the waters. I saw then. I was coming down from the Upper Rooms. I beg you to pardon my presumption, and abruptness——'

'Do not think of it in those terms, Mr. Wentworth,' her mother intervened. 'You have saved her hod from spilling, silly child. I do not know how we should have tolerated this heat till Saturday, with only the content of one hod.'

'Mother, please!' whispered Jane, appalled by her mother's crassness; 'he is *Captain* Wentworth now, of the tug *Grappler*.'

'Oh indeed? And what is a sailor doing in the Pump Room? I had thought they spent their whole lives amid water!'

'That is easily explained, Madam,' he rejoined, apparently taking no offence; though Jane could hardly trust he could be so oblivious of her mother's impudence that passed for frankness. 'You must know how this Room receives waters from the great terminal in Lyme Bay. I have just returned from a fortunate enterprise with the dear old *Grappler*: a twenty-five mile 'berg, that only melted to twenty-one mile on the voyage north—adequate prize-money, and a week's furlough while the 'berg is quarried. Why, Lyme Bay is almost wholly blocked by it.'

'I never understand why you cannot hunt in the Arctic Ocean,' her mother cavilled. 'After all it is so much closer.'

'The Arctic growlers are such craggy beasts, Madam,' he explained patiently. 'The 'bergs of Antarctica are smooth and float like table tops. I thought I should see this Pump Room during the furlough, since I have,' and here he hesitated, glancing away into the distance; 'some happy memories of the times before we had need of Pump Rooms.'

His last words sounded harsh; they seemed to embrace the entire crowd with their hods, including Jane and her mother, in disdain.

'Mother,' Jane said quietly, realizing how demeaned they must appear in their petty anxieties over a few pints of water to a Captain who practically owned the sea; 'you forget we must leave the room by twelve. Or there are penalties—'

'It is not necessary, Miss Elliot. I shall speak to the Master of Ceremonies at once. I am supplied with a free pass for any hour of the day; my guests, too. And did I not say,' he added, 'some happy memories—?'

'We may stay after noon?' cried her mother in a transport of vulgarity; 'into the fashionable hour?'

For the third time that morning Jane had strong cause to bless the yashmak which good taste demanded and hygiene recommended.

Yet even in this extremity Captain Wentworth rallied staunchly. Offering her mother his free arm, he shouldered a way for the two women back through the protesting crowd to the Pumpside; where all was arranged; not only for that one day, but for each Tuesday and Saturday. For as long as they attended this Pump, they might present themselves from noon till one o'clock.

'What a great traveller you must have been, Sir!' exclaimed her mother to Captain Wentworth as he escorted them down to the Lower Room, to show them the great storage tanks and fat inlet pipes that ran all the way underground, from Lyme Regis, by way of Yeovil, Shepton Mallet,

and Radstock. 'I declare it to be so cool in here, I could catch a chill! Is there ice in these tanks?'

'Hardly, or it could not have reached here through the pipes,' he laughed.

'It is so blissfully cool,' Jane said swiftly. 'Is it really this way in the Antarctic?'

'Even cooler, Miss Elliot. Sometimes so bitter, you would not believe. Though passing through the Tropics, we encounter months of heat to match any in this City.'

'Those hot breezes are not so grey and tainting, I warrant!'

'True, Miss Elliot,' he acknowledged, with a nod; comparing, perhaps, what he had seen of her complexion when she raised the yashmak with his own—seasoned, but salubrious. She could only hope not.

Though what was the use of hope? What was there to hope for further from this encounter, beyond what had already been achieved, so amazingly, through a few brief words of the Captain's; their promotion to the noon hour?

Their triumphal progress through the Pump Room itself to the Cheap Street entrance, escorted by a gallant Captain, amid the fashionable noon-hour crowd; their farewell plunge into the outer throng, with full hods; the compact to meet again in the Pump Room on the coming Saturday, the last of Frederick Wentworth's furlough before his return to *Grappler* and the Southern Oceans; these were enough to spread purification and perfume for Mrs. Elliot all the way back to Westgate Buildings.

Jane almost persuaded herself that they were sufficient for her, too.

How delightful the encouragements of Dr. Hood! reflected Mrs. Elliot, as she sat sipping a cup of best Pekoe tea from Wedgwood china; nibbling the small almond biscuits upon which Mrs. Hepburn, a fat, jolly housekeeper, lavished culinary art every week.

Mrs. Hepburn would indeed be an acquisition to any establishment. Yet Mrs. Elliot entertained no intention of

luring Mrs. Hepburn away from the good Doctor; rather that the good Doctor should himself be lured—into persuading Mrs. Elliot 'to do him the honour' of changing her name.

To this end, she pursued the intolerable burden of bearing weekly witness to dear Jane's horrid fantasies; and seeing the hideous, wilful wreck of her good looks. It had to be gone through; of this much Mrs. Elliot remained keenly sensible. Any affection which was to grow between herself and the Doctor must be based upon compassion: the same compassion that had persuaded him to evade proper recognition of his medical skills for the dour and unrewarding labours of a resident physician at the Bethlem. That at least should be put an end to; with Mrs. Elliot by his side, Dr. Hood's excellent talents, both social and medical, should be given their proper recognition in society.

Yet before these happy visions could be fulfilled, she must endure that awful fag, those unhappy visions of her mad daughter.

'How is my poor Jane, this week?' she sighed. 'Is there to be no hope?'

'I fear not, Madam, if I must be frank; and I freely confess that our growing intimacy compels me to such a course.'

'True, Dr. Hood, there must be no dissimulation between true friends; I should think less of you were you anything but frank.'

'Let us pay a call on Miss Elliot, then; and I will tell you, as we walk—the little that there is to tell!'

As Mrs. Hepburn appeared to clear the table, Mrs. Elliot made a point of lavishing her customary praise upon the almond biscuits; the Doctor's housekeeper duly simpered and smirked, watching the Doctor by no means disapprovingly as he extended an arm to escort Mrs. Elliot. She too, though devoted to the good Doctor, found the Bethlem a less than congenial platform from which to display her many talents.

Nothing so blatant as the vulgarity of a wink was exchanged between the two women; still, each in their separate stations were of one mind.

'She sees a different world, one that is not here,' observed Dr. Hood, as they walked from his house, down a gravel path to an iron gate. 'At first I believed she was rehearsing scenes from the old Bedlam. The dense crowds; the foul atmosphere; the clammering of woe-begotten minds after simple necessities. Yet why should she? There is a library, a music room, a room for games. Whist can be played, or nap or faro. We own a passable piano and spinnet.'

'All thanks to you, dear Dr. Hood!'

The Doctor demurred, showing genuine unaffected modesty. Unlocking the iron gate, he held it wide for Mrs. Elliot, and they passed through a gravel yard to another locked door which he opened for her. A long corridor stretched before them, rays of sunlight filtering through the high, barred windows, illuminating motes of dust.

'Besides, it is not the old Bedlam she sees; or believes she sees. I am almost tempted to suggest that it is a Bedlam which does not yet exist! But that is plainly nonsense; an idle fantasy! I am forced to conclude that the genesis of Miss Elliot's sad condition lies in her disappointment in love. *That* provides the scenery of her painful agitation. Magnifying an agonizing moment that occurred in the Pump Room at Bath, she *projects*—if I may stretch a word beyond its customary usage—her own grief upon that Room, till it grows grievous instead of her.'

'The Pump Room,' smiled Mrs. Elliot nostalgically; 'a truly delightful building, in a delightful city. How can she see anything vile in that?'

'But is that not where she was disappointed? Or so I understood. Did you not tell me yourself, Madam, how she fainted in the Pump Room? I believe a wound was dealt to her tender soul, that day . . .'

He unlocked the door at the end of the corridor; soon they were by Jane's room.

'No, no, dear Doctor Hood,' insisted Mrs. Elliot. 'You are mistaken. The circumstances were otherwise; the fault, on Jane's side. She, alas, was the instrument of disappointing a most excellent suitor who had all my blessing. She was already mad, I fear.'

Mrs. Elliot lingered outside Jane's room. In truth, she had no wish to enter.

'Everything was perfect for the match, Dr. Hood, till that fearful morning when she and I, with Captain Wentworth and the late Mr. Elliot (who was taking a glass of the waters for reasons of health) foregathered in the Pump Room. A perfect and amusing morning; all was happiness. Mr. Elliot, after drinking his glass of water, joined some other gentlemen to discuss the political situation; whilst we ladies walked about with the Captain, noticing every new face and new bonnet in the room. Captain Wentworth escorted Jane with great solicitude, talking to her of the sea and a sailor's life; when quite abruptly Jane blanched and cried out—to the horror and discomfiture of all—'I see it as it is!'; and promptly fell down in a faint. Captain Wentworth, who had caught her up, knelt with her in his arms, looking on her in an agony of silence with a face as pallid as her own. But when poor Jane opened her eyes a few moments later, it was not on this world nor on his face that she opened them. To say that she broke the engagement wilfully, is to ascribe too much lucidity to inexplicable behaviour. Yet to imply that he disappointed her in any way would be the gravest injustice to a gallant gentleman. So inexplicable indeed, were my daughter's actions that day, that far from the waters of Bath doing dear Mr. Elliot any good,' Mrs. Elliot stifled a sob, and Dr. Hood pressed her arm comfortingly; 'he languished and died, of very shame I believe!'

'Thus she fell after she cried out,' asserted Dr. Hood; 'the fall was therefore not the cause of injury. Perhaps she suffered some fit prior to her fall that wounded her brain. I cannot tell. Maybe a century or more from now, medical science may be able to explore the brain. Yet, piecing together Miss Elliot's scattered thoughts, one almost disbelieves in the possibility of such, or any, progress!'

He opened Jane's door; Mother and Physician stepped into the room.

Jane sat hunched and haggard, wearing a torn, soiled gown, her hair tumbling in untidy strings about her ruined

features. Sunlight fell upon her face, etching all the wrinkles of irrational worry.

'We tidied her only this morning; yet she untidies herself. We gave her a fresh gown; yet she soils it instantly. We combed her hair; yet——'

'Do not say anything, dear Doctor. There is no need. I understand that your solicitude for her equals my own.'

Jane stared at her visitors in exhausted reverie.

'I am thirsty, Mother,' she cried; 'such heat and crowds!'

'There are no more than three people in this room, Jane,' Mrs. Elliot rebuked her; 'that hardly constitutes a crowd, despite the proverb; and my landaulette was driven through almost empty streets, to visit you.'

'I am thirsty, Mother.'

'Yet she will not drink; resists drinking,' whispered Dr. Hood; 'except upon extreme persuasion——'

He poured a cup of water from the ewer on the table; proffered it to Jane who held it for a moment, gazing into it; before suddenly inverting the cup and spilling every last drop of water deliberately on to the paved floor.

'I am thirsty, Mother,' her thin voice complained. 'The crowds! The heat!'

THE SEAFARER

by

RITCHIE SMITH and THOMAS PENMAN

A crew of people sundered from the roots of their culture would seek to retain what they could and to enhance the dream-dust sparkle of memories of beauty and truth, and who would blame them if they exaggerated their cultural heritage into artistic indigestion and intellectual snobbery that verged on the fringe of bad taste? Could blame attach to the drives of those who wish to learn and who inevitably flock to those who know? Richard Mantree Karangetti was only too well aware, through his own peculiar and personal psychic problems, that he must tread this razor-sharp dividing line with exquisite care . . .

THE SEAFARER

ONE

THEIR boat's prow was a magical-smith's hammer, beating upon the steel blue anvil, scattering bright showers of whiteness. She ran vast, their *Goldberry*, over the silver-flowered blue fields of the sea, with spray a cloak she wore about her, flapping and wetly billowing.

Putting out from Grey Havens in the early morning rain, after Karangetti and a smiling canvas-crawler acquaintance of his had raised up the swelling orange sail, he had steered his sea-craft to the south and east, then she had begun to flee before the wind. Time passed. And while they were eating the bread and cheese and the ripe, tangy citrus fruits that Ana had prepared, and mockingly raising toasts in the vitriolic spirit Richard poured from a wickerworked bottle, they found the softer hues of afternoon all around them: somewhere, their *Goldberry* had ran out from the later brightness of morning.

About this time a ship appeared out of the distance; he recognized her, a bluff ungainly paddle-cruiser on picket duties off the coastal waters of Mancontinent, all military camouflage greyness and raw, unnatural straight lines, with a single stack trailing a white scarf of smoke; fore and aft were rocket-launcher bundles and light steam cannon. She had hooted twice, three times, as she crossed their course; tiny figures of men waved back at them. Then, she was past, and receding, and soon there were again only the sun and some ghosts of cloud hanging in the vast blueness of the sky, and the darker, mirroring blueness of the sea, with somewhere a horizon sandwiched between.

Karangetti had not mentioned where he was steering for,

and Anatera had not asked, for he appeared, even for him, to be preoccupied and self-absorbed.

So, Ana talked of trivia or did not talk, but fell to watching the glittering sea slide endlessly past them. She hid her creamy, oval face behind her raven hair, daydreaming of last night when he had escorted her to the tavern, of raising her grotesque glass stein, peering fascinatedly through its smooth, bubble-bright amberiness, seeing the wink of mellow candlelight on copper curio-pieces and objet d'art coloured glass. She thought of the liquors she had tasted; and the old songs, thin through others' laughter, haunted Anatera's memory.

Finally—'Richard *Mantree* Karangetti ...' He glanced gravely at her light smile, salt spume glittering on his cheek. 'How did you come by such a curious name?' she asked.

Wondering which fable to recount he laughed warmly, because she wore a flower called Lady-of-the-Lake in her hair, and he had named it, long ago.

'I'll admit it: pure imagination, although the surname is mine. First Christian name ... let's say in a previous life I was a friend of the House of York, back when the Roses of England were strangling one another. Now the *middle* bit comes from an Old Chinese ideogram Ezra Pound dissected in an essay once. I read,' he recollected, with a sudden tartness, 'that one early spring day in the Yankee Catskills ... sun tangled in tree's branches, at dawn ... Man ... tree ...' So says what I see in memory's dim looking-glass, anyway.

'More, you want? Well, the weather was misty, faintly autumnal. I walked in ferns, under dripping leaves. It was very, very quiet. "Poem in October", but I was ... oh, nineteen maybe ... and there was a glade atop the hill where you had a clear prospect, and the sky was huge, a natural cathedral of paling, unfrosting blue glass, with rafters made of cirrus, choirs of skylarks: holding a mystic ambience.' He smiled. 'I thought I was Burne-Jones, out of what was once called the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, because the pictures I could see were so arcanelly, purely beautiful ...' He looked

away, over the sea. 'And I disliked my old "Christian" names, anyway ...'

Time passed as Karangetti read some of his love-poems, and Ana watched the warm glow of the sun through closed eyelids, and basked. She particularly liked the one where he compared her to a summer's day. Later, she sang: old songs, amorous ballads, sea-shanties, and Karangetti accompanied her gently on sitar, tiller pegged firmly beneath his elbow.

And then there it was. Rising out of the sea from a smudge of land-ho at the edge of distance; to a laugh from Anatera and a slow nod from Karangetti: an island. Perhaps half a dozen miles square it spread, she guessed, lightly forested, like green moss on a stone; its silhouette rose to a high hill towards one end. The isle had grown, and grown, until now the sky was noisy with its gulls and sea-wights, the hunch-back hill loomed high, and the sea itself had not merely white torn edges where the island thrust itself out of it, but actual, massive bursts of foam that crashed on rocks and swirled and made noises like sleeping dragons.

It took Karangetti some minutes to tack inshore and find the cove, and more to beach *Goldberry*, to draw her water-jewelled body up on the narrow bow of sand. That done, they caught up the supplies and gear they had brought with them and started up the small beach towards the appearing green of the shingle's botany.

Ana laying her head over to one side and blinking her sea-green eyes paused daintily to finger-comb out her long, luxuriantly black hair, which was pearly with spindrift and made wild by the wind. Karangetti stalked a few steps further through the sands before pausing and glancing back over his shoulder.

'C'mon,' he said. 'I know an old place built in a nook in the hill.' Karangetti gestured west, at the seaward side. 'It's been abandoned to ghosts for some centuries; but we should not suffer much over two nights. Each year, at this green season, I like to come. A sort of troth-plighting, and a rite of renewal. But of course—you know how lax I am, Ana—I

often fail. I suppose I'm just a loser and a heart-breaker, really . . .' he trailed off.

'That is perhaps all very well, Richard, but . . . what else?' She opened her clasped hands, spasmodically.

'Hmnh?'

'This place. What is it? Why are you drawn here?'

He gave an automatic 'Why not?', then paused a moment. She felt the change come over him. The net of emotion that had been slowly drawing inside him suddenly tightened, yielding to her the silvery flicker and churning caught within it: she sensed bright moments, words, faces, gestures . . .

The Free Order, who had instructed this seduction, had been unable to locate her exactly in any of their precisely-drawn classes of parability; but among other things, Ana had traces of the empathetic Talent. It was the storm-compass she always used to steer through Karangetti's wildly fluctuating moods and passions.

In the broken kaleidoscope, she perceived that the place *meant*, deeply.

'This——' Karangetti shaded his eyes from the sun, and looked around as the island dreamed itself about them. '—was an Isle of the Blessed. The island of the man who died.' His face twisted around a small, twisted smile. 'And then history happened. Come on, Anatera.' He started walking again, whistling to himself with an effort not looking back. He carried their tied bedroll over his right shoulder, hooked in one finger as one might sling a jacket. Down by his left side he swung a light canvas bag holding various knick-knacks, and his ever-present sitar, slung rifle-like from his left shoulder at a slight angle, banged its bulbous gourd against his hip as he walked.

She started after him, hurrying to catch up, finding the sand still hot and loose beneath her feet which were clad only with foot-jewellery.

He murmured: "'Here, once, east and west were confused, and autumn and spring were one, and there grew magic herbs and moly",' but she could not see his face. After a moment of trudging he gave a small laugh.

'Once, only once?'

'Aye.' He didn't give a small laugh. 'The world has passed by.'

They departed the swordgrass stands girdling the beach, and began to mount the silky-green slope of the hill, following the vivid orange mosses that coloured what might have been a long overgrown promenading-place. From a clump of banyan, a lizard flickered across their path, insectile and bright green. Ana heard a cuckoo calling somewhere across the island. As they walked together, Karangetti shook his head, and his hair, which shagged over his shoulders in a vague mass of black curls, heaved with the motion.

'Atop and within these limestone cliffs is a moment out of my past. That's all. No one in the world recalls it now, except for me.'

She side-glanced at him. 'Then why come back?'

She had another fragment of her Rosetta stone then, as he turned and said quietly to her, 'For remembrance' sake, Ana. To look back, and maybe to wonder. To feel glad to be alive ...'

Two

LATER, they passed through a screen of chameleon-blossom and came upon the sunken gardens. Water tinkled somewhere as they descended the staircase cut into the living stone.

'This used to be a formal garden, didn't it?' she said, entering.

Karangetti nodded, and lifted a hand to sweep away an over-reaching green arm of sweetbriar that swayed in front of his face.

'These are all the flowers of lost Home.'

She nodded vaguely, as she wandered entranced ahead into the midst of the rampant floweriness, arms trailing, hands touching, face radiant. Karangetti watched her dispassionately, and there was something, a certain *déjà vu* perhaps, in the way she moved, in how her hips rocked beneath the ankle-length, limp, simple gown of white.

'We called these the Gardens of Life. But they have all fallen into ruin and wildness these many years.'

Slender, giant sunflowers, growing higher than ever they did on Earth, hung their mellow, yellow receiving dishes beneath the outpourings of a sun that was slightly whiter than the Sol of Home. All about, briars draped the trees, littered them with explosions of coloured crepe and wraithed them about with humid, strangely exotic perfumes. In Ana's eyes, all the flowers were on fire.

She stopped, stooped to touch one, delicately. She smelled its erotic sweetness, beamed with simple delight, then savoured it again. 'Richard?'

'I am here.'

'This isn't ...?' He could read the question in her face too.

'A rose? Yes, it is. As are these. These are the oldest roses in the world, and even they are mutating and dwindling. See ...' He plucked out the delicately misshapen crimson flower, matched it with a twisted white rose; then he allowed his hands to go limp, and the petals tumbled to the ground.

He gestured and, sometimes specifically pointing about the garden, named for her the flowers, the birds and the insects. Further off clustered stands of chrysanthemums, growing amidst the once-sculptured trees, just as though in a Japanese garden that had flourished beneath Fuji-Yama's slopes, somewhere in the faery tale of 'once upon a time'.

Anemones and columbines, daffodils and lavender, and many that he could not now find a title or even a lineage for, grew around them. Willows and maidenhair trees rustled beside the small silver lake they walked towards, and king crimson was in bloody riot among the greenness. Standing guard were islets of what might have been cherry and almond trees in full, living pink blossom. They saw yellow and purple and scarlet and blue and lilac, and broken Bifrost. All unordered and confused and vivid with life.

It was the tapestry of a mad Penelope.

They left the ornamental gardens, and from the crown of the hill walked down towards the sea. It was shouting up at them from the foot of the cliff, and the faint east wind had freshened. The sky was soon scrubbed almost clean.

'And this?' Ana said, turning to him in wonder and sadness, 'was it once your home?'

'It used to be, and I helped build it here. After a while I left it, and went away again. Now its only tenants are the wind, and the memories blown about with the dust. It belongs to no one anymore.'

Something had happened to the house a long time before. Time had happened to it since.

It had been low and simple and glittering white, and fused silk smooth, like something from the twentieth century in stainless steel, or a sculpture from the twentieth before Christ in polished jade. It had been struck by something, Ana saw, and a great hole opened in it, and the creamy-coloured fused rock had turned to smoky glass again in places. The house, she thought, was a carious tooth, a ruined thing that once had had an ascetic beauty in its perfection.

Karangetti climbed into the cottage, and moved from room to broken room, to open-roofed space, to yet another broken room. And there was nothing there ... Nothing remained except walls, and spaces where walls used to be, glistening with the webs of a land crustacean that might be called an insect. He looked about him, then left the place's strangeness.

Outside, Anatera was walking through interweaving flowers and brambles among the jazzy colours of the grown-wild herb-garden. She had her back to him, straight, slender, and her hair was a dark flame that breathed down her white gown. Fairer than the flowers ... At times, she made him feel as grotesque as a self-parody, sometimes merely awkward. On occasion, she seemed to babble with no more than the attractive, clichéd shallowness of a Brooke. Yet she was a woman, and she had time to change; Karangetti knew he had enough time to see her come to full blossom. Heaven knows, he had time. He stood there, dreading the day he

must leave her, tear out the tenuous roots she gave him, destroy the illusion of permanence she wove about the moment. But he would not be able to bear it, seeing that flower fade past full bloom. And so he'd have to follow the sun . . .

That was still some moments off, however.

Anatera raised her hand above her head, half open, half clenched, with two half-bent fingers extended. A moment passed, meaninglessly. And then something huge and bright and all colours came flitting through the garden's wildness, swooped up, then alighted on her hand, wafting its paper wings for a moment. Karangetti saw it was a fantastical acid-dream of a butterfly, with wings like an artist's sheaf of canvases, rainbow-whorled. It was no insect; but then, this was not Home.

She turned, knowing he was looking at her, and the—butterfly—fanned its wings in alarm at the motion.

'Look! Isn't it beautiful?'

'My lady,' he said, considering making a mock bow, 'you charm all creatures with your grace and beauty . . .'

She smiled, freeing it. 'Did they have glory-wings such as this on Home?' With a jerky movement, the creature was gone.

'No. Not quite like that. We—Home was a greater world than Exile. Things weighed so heavily there . . .'

'How can that be?'

He shrugged, and removed the blade of grass he had been chewing on. 'How can you summon glory-wings to your fingers?'

She smiled, standing facing him waist-deep in the flowers, Guinevere, in a long white gown, whose eyes were green.

'Perhaps I am a witch.'

He smiled and shook his head, thinking of the steps that wound down into the catacombs of the island, and then he said: 'No. No. You're a bright flower, a child of the spring-time, a lady . . .' and knew the answer would not entirely please her.

Then Karangetti's eyes re-explored the heavy pendant that hung low from the silver chain belt that slackly looped

her waist. It was of fine gold filigree work and amethyst. He had given it to her of course.

She smiled again, with a lazy, sensual slowness. 'Well, who knows, who knows . . .' And Karangetti felt an emotion rise within him, as though conjured by witch's gestures. A deep tenseness, and a growing heady fire. He laughed, and nodded defeat.

Still remembering that there *had* been a magic lady, once . . .

His sitar and gear lay on the grass by the path to the cottage door. He glanced at it, then into the heart of the old rose-bower which was floored with mossy turf and a carpet of delicate flowers; he looked crookedly at her.

' "Our bed is green, my love . . ." '

And she was—terrible, as an army with banners.

Writhing blue and smoky across the sky, clouds hid the dwindling afternoon and later the sun showered itself chill upon their warmed and drowsing flesh. He knew then it was time to go underground, and for their duel of love to intensify and deepen. Time for the sensual and abandoned poppy-oblivion of sex, or the merging of symbolic blood-red and white roses which was the truer self-transcendence of real, holy love. So, lighting a whale-oil lantern for the unlit sections, Karangetti led her into the labyrinth, fearing the darkness, the dank cold, or simply fearing: because it was time for changes.

THREE

IT WAS early evening. The Gospel was saying to her,

'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life . . .'

'And the Lord God planted a garden, eastward, in Eden.'

She slipped among the silky pages of the huge iron-flanged lectern Bible, amazed. An Authorized Version!

Those subterranean passageways and rooms Karangetti had tacitly ushered her through had the complexity of a Chinese puzzle-ring: each connecting series of fused-glass

chambers, as they passed within, had acted as a Whispering Gallery. Flutter-echo and phasing; that was what Karangetti was very often reminded of as he re-wound the maze.

Soon his footsteps resounded to her.

Glancing up from the Book on its low coffee-table, propping up the small, rounded chin on the heel of one hand, she saw how he entered, his brief nod, and just where his erratic glances were focusing: into the ingle-nook by the great fireplace where the room's pearly phosphorescence was gleaming smoothly over the shellacs and gold-leaf of a baroque, ornamental harpsinette. And so she asked, 'perhaps I can play for you. One of the folio of compositions you brought me——? I like *Maple Leaf Rag*. That chiming, sort of fin-de-sieclly piano piece . . . It's from, ah, Aemericca, is it not?'

Again he nodded slowly, once, twice, and trudged over to the thin vertical slit of windows which gave a clear prospect of the feverishly shifting sun-burnished sea. The sky was pink. Construing his behaviour as a moody man's assent, Ana got up and walked, smoothed her paisley-patterned brocade skirt, sat down, and, from memory, played some favourite pieces.

A stride piano beat out the ragtime tune; then, à la Debussy, a golliwog cake-walked; then, she played the 'Clair de Lune' to Karangetti, who saw moonlight. More vivid images still jostled before Karangetti's inner eye; but he bit his lip and tossed his head, half angry, and coldly ignoring the neurotic cinema-show his psyche was staging. When she ceased, silence fell, clear as a bell, a stilly mutual hush. Then, after choosing a poem with wry, astringently self-contemptuous care, he opened the calfskin-bound anthology he carried, and began to read her Flecker's 'To a poet, a Thousand Years Hence.'

Emphatically, he sensed he had touched Anatera of the White Leaf; he saw, hating himself, tears gleaming just below her green, perpetually innocently surprised eyes. But, he acknowledged, their boring, yet—moving—emotional charades would, have to wind on to their conclusion of vivid lovetrysts simply because he *needed* her. But nothing

in him would ever be changed . . . Cynically, he quoted himself the terrifying promise of the Book of Revelations: *we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.*

'Will you play, Richard Mantree, and verbalize this for me—?'

'Mmh?' He turned.

She offered him the manuscript. 'Explain this music to me as you recreate it. You speak with such beauty of all your arts.'

So she curled comfortably against his legs as Karangetti sat and fingered a voice from the ivories and the ebonies. And he thought, inferior musicianship will once again disguise itself with indulgent emotionality . . .

He said, faintly, closing his eyes and furrowing his forehead in pain: 'Beethoven. The "Moonlight" Sonata. Written 1800. Here, a sublime poignancy, sweet sadness intensifying into a profoundly meditative tension: one's visual image is a full silver moon, beaming over and glittering in the Danube at midnight. Overall, an occasional savagery of statement will combine with an almost Mozartian delicacy and elegance: you see,' he went on, 'I perceive myself in the whole work, in this subtle combat, this spirit-clash of alchemical elements; it is fire and roaring air, against water and earth. In myself, I mirror this Romanticism, the *appassionata*, versus the old, eighteenth century stately blandness. Rousseau's jungle, versus Montesquieu's *jardin anglais*, the *orderly*, pseudo randomness—listen! That sense of hierarchy, the coolness, against this *angst*-ridden drive to freedom and to revolution!'

His fingers ceased playing as he turned for a moment and explained the image-motif further. 'It has moments of Gothic, like the symphonies: moments of a Constable landscape: *of course* there is a tendency towards the grotesque. It is,' and he resumed music-making, 'Handel struggling to be Nietzsche—And in this movement, outwardly a simple, nursery-rhyme-like melodic happiness; *andante con moto*, a pleasure of no more than maidenly intensity. Which ripens . . .' he waited, while Ana was frozenly aware of both his absurd egocentricity and the immense gulfs which separate

knowledge from ignorance, 'into true and adult passion, and I of course dare n—'

It hurt. For that moment of pure schizophrenia, Karangetti was dazed. He pressed his beringed hands to his eyes, wondering if he had now awoken from a dream—or *into* a dream? But he did not know. And suddenly now he knew his chrysalis of irony and indifference was beginning to crack as his spirit quaked and heaved, becoming unwillingly naked. What *am* I? he thought. Who am I? Who am I?

At that point he opened his eyes, and he laughed. The last pink gauze of dusk was darkening against the west's purples and blue-blacks, and there a dirigible sailed by a delicate ghost of tinted cellophane, its interior lit up by phosphorus-and-salt torches. It was a Chinese lantern, caught by the wind. He heard its motors distantly thrum, though their sound was almost drowned by the sea's hiss.

'Richard? What is it?'

There was real worry in her voice; his mind cleared, and in one sudden motion of unpremeditated tenderness, he fell to his knees, and took Ana's body in his arms; Karangetti murmured in her ear, began smoothing down her en-chignonned, raven-black hair, and then met her in a kiss.

'Whoo,' she said, breaking away. 'Richard, I—' she broke off, chagrined, suddenly realizing that whatever his mysteries were, she would not serve the elders of her Order against his wishes. And inwardly, he was measuring his 'genius' against his behaviour, and finding himself merely pathetic and emotional—not a figure emanating the authentic, Byronic charisma. Not at all.

Her Book of Corpus Christi lay open and forgotten, as did the file of Hokusai reproductions he had unearthed: they knew that they could relate now only to each other. Suddenly he remembered that, in the sky, the sun was set, and now the dim blue third magnitude stars were coming out to make constellations with their gaudier brethren.

Firstly, they avoided one another's gaze. Then she sighed, and sprawled back upon the fur-strewn, iridescent glass of the floor, and he unsealed his ancient vacuum flask, lay with

her, and poured out two steaming-hot saké cups of whisky-laced *kerl*. They drank together, rolling the rich, liqueur-like flavours about their tongues. And although the silence deepened, it became wordlessly sensual, mutual, and entirely pleasant. They smiled.

Upon which, he rose, and stoked the poppy-red burning of the fire with driftwood speckled with seasalt, and green, young boughs. She tossed her harvested roses into the blaze. And so, before the crackling and the poppings, they dozed, or talked love-talk, or sang wordless harmonies, one to another. Later, Ana said that it was the Night of All Moons; they must beware of the eerie lunacy that conjunction of illuminations caused. Karangetti chuckled comfortably then, and told her of one of the Christian mysteries, about a transfiguration in a Garden . . .

FOUR

UPON the smooth tapestry-draped wall a chronometer ticked and tocked. Elsewhere, Anatera was quietly clattering, her sounds were of washing-up and towelling, domestic and quite peaceful. So he crept away from her, into the labyrinthian ways.

Later, as he elbowed shut the massive, iron-knubbed wooden door, Karangetti's right heel slid away on the moistureslick, mossy granite flagstones. He felt afraid, and night had drowned his sight in its blackness. But he followed the ruined road.

Under his breath, he was mumbling some invocatory, exalting lines of William Wordsworth, about a communion with

' . . . something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit . . . '

There were gates of brass, three times the height of a man, and a glimpse of moonlit gardens beyond: hefting his Indian musical instrument, he turned the huge key, heaved, and the

curlicued barriers creaked open to his push. He walked on into the islets of trees with a hypnotized steadiness; among a strange rock garden's sculptures; between hedges of wild, vast goldroses, brushing aside some of the silently jangling, ghostly flowers as he passed. Westward, a melodious night-bird sang a madrigal, and clouds of swallow-tailed butterflies danced darkly across the pale face of a moon.

He stood motionless, upon the hump of a little stone bridge. Below, trees lisped about the crazy midnight confusion of flowers, some of which were faintly glowing, some night-black. On the love-sick wind, from everywhere, there was a sensible a mutual awareness: thus, his mind regarded that great moat of flowers, and the gardens exaltingly responded to his gaze. He felt his soul expand in the sensuous dark. In the light of the three moons, a dew was falling upon his upturned face, a cobweb spun from the complex silvers of the ever-shifting shadows.

In its coffin of round skull, Karangetti's soul stirred, mindlessly, restlessly reaching for the overwhelming *presence* of the greenery, still faintly motified with heraldic symbols, the Lilies, the Leopards. Over his shoulder, the ringing clumps of whispering trees, each copse arranged as in some eighteenth century French garden, were overlaid with significance. Some Presence had *glacé* the tiny, turning hands which were their green, wavering leaves. All the growing things he saw quickened with beauty, significance, and *otherness*.

He smiled beatifically as the glass surfacing the Universe melted; he could see through—no, he *was*—the eye of Eternity. The senses of his body were all hypersensitive, yet somehow they dwindled. Now he looked about him, and was frozen by the synaesthetic weirdness of every sound he could hear having its individual veil of colours. He felt awe, and something of Nirvana, the bliss of not-being.

'This spinning-top world', he thought, 'is a whirligig, a circling bird trapped in gravity's net, a dancer about this incredible furnace called the Sun, which is itself whirling through the galaxy, and those one hundred thousand million suns, all bathed in light are turning, turning, in a maze of heat and sound, and all the island universes are flying apart.'

The Universe is a great four-dimensional chalice, brimming with colour, and sound, and life. It is ineffable. It is glory.'

Somewhere, in the resounding, cool caverns of his exhilaration, he searched for a sharp image, and conceived a pavane of light within a sacrosanct music.

'O!' he said, 'And the clouds unfold . . .'

—For a moment, he was Blake, and his voice was tuned as purely as an oboe—

' . . . I . . . see . . . a world, in a grain of sand,

Heaven in a wild flower.

Hold infinity in the palm of my hand,

And eternity in an hour . . .'

After some time a star fell, like a single strand of spider-web drawn across the black echoing sky. It sang a wan, ecstatic song of light, *Kyrie eleison . . . gloria, gloria*. To a music that might have come from striking icicles, so clear and melodiously bittersweet was it, a girl's voice suddenly returned from the ancient past to haunt his mind: 'Judy Collins sang Yeats, 'The Lake-Isle of Innisfree'. Most beautifully and aetherially, it said: Home. A world more with us than we can ever know. Home.

Suddenly, he realized,

—I am speaking to the Moon—

She seemed to call him. He answered, at first glibly and inconsequentially, but soon he was confessing it all, to everyone. She lisped her responses in the susurant voice of the grasses, the wind and flowers and trees.

At last he was granted absolution. And so the moons descended upon him in the guise of an argent, shadowy beckoning maiden. She led him on, so he forded waist-deep through the moat of dewy flowers, to where the moonlight's magic transmutation had turned stone into sugary icing, and flowers into glowing, stained glass. The fountain tinkled like a chandelier.

Marguerite turned then. Her eyes were huge, and, except for moondapple, quite empty. Her lips opened, and words blossomed soundlessly in his mind.

—In the name of yourself, sing, sing, sing. Be a poet, and name everything. Do not fear—do not fear—

She departed then, the Lady of the Leopards, but to remind him of his curse, she first aged into a grey-robed, bent crone who offered him the broad wicker basket her arms enclosed, which was heaped with lilacs and roses. Then she faded into the shadows flickering about the bonsai.

Karangetti looked about the glade, realizing where he was. The sky was quite clear of cloud. Fastened to the stone drinking-fountain by the self-same chain was an iron cup. He picked it up, pulled the brass spigot, and rinsed it out in the icy springwater. When he drank, it was like a sparkling champagne. Seating himself against the squat stone shape in an almost lotus-posture, he pulled his sitar to him. First he plucked a ringing, resonatingly buzzing chord, and then began to sing.

It was an old tune, with medieval words, about the Grail. It was the Corpus Christi Carol that he sang.

Lully, lulley, lully, lulley,
The falcon hath borne my mak away.
He bore him up, he bore him down,
He bore him into an orchard brown.
In that orchard there was a hall,
That was hanged with purple and pall.
And in that hall there was a bed:
It was hanged with gold so red.
And in that bed there lieth a knight,
His wounds bleeding by day and night.
By that bed's side there kneeleth a maid,
And she weepeth both night and day.
And by that bed's side there standeth a stone,
'Corpus Christi' written thereon . . .

He ceased, and everything was stilly hushness. His soul was all dewy wet. It was as if some subtle music rose with his welling blood, sweet chord after chord. He heard it clearly, above the lap of the water, as, enchanted, he walked through fresh-eyed marigolds to the lake. There were golden fishes, and stepping-stones, and in the bewildering,

translucent depths swam reflections of the moons. His sitar moved slightly twanging.

Karangetti paused, took several deep breaths, and looked blindly about him. Then he walked into the icy lapping waters of the moon.

When he emerged, he went back. And seeing her he thought her flesh was become transparent. For through it, as a multicoloured flame, he could see beauties, and darker ugliness, and a fiery music: it was Anatera's soul. As he enclosed her, a brightness fell upon her face.

'I know the secret,' he whispered, touching her face. 'We are the secret. All of us; and we are unstoppable love . . .'

FIVE

THE NEXT morning he partially spent showing her around. She looked at him secretly, wondering if she really believed all his wild and whirling words about 'Earth', and those long-past centuries. Once she stopped in front of a dusty reproduction hung upon a wall, and looked at it for a moment. Then she turned and said: 'Who is she?'

Karangetti sighed. 'Once in a land called Italy there was a nobleman called Ludovico. When he was forty years old he married a girl of fifteen called Beatrice d'Este, who was herself the daughter of a duke. And she died at twenty-two, and Ludovico was inconsolable. That is her portrait, by a man called Leonardo.'

'A sad story, for such a beautiful picture.'

'It's true to the nature of life.' He paused, tiredly. 'Da Vinci knew that, but he once saw some hope: *Cosa bella mortal passa e non d'arte*. Mortal beauties pass away, but not those of art . . . Come.'

Afterwards they sat upon the green turf of the cliff overlooking the sea, and Ana ate grapes and offered him a sweet chicory-coloured cordial made from raisins. But he was playing, the oldest tunes he knew.

'What is your song, song-smith?' she asked.

'In Tudor England, they called it 'Greensleeves'. To it, Shakespeare's country watched an Armada die. I liked such old things, beautiful things, around me, because it takes time that little longer to strip them away, to leave you naked and alone.'

There were no words she could say.

Then: 'I would like you to tell me, truly . . . Am I beautiful?'

He looked at her, looked away. 'You are to me,' he said, slowly, 'like the memory of the first fresh-as-dew rainbow you ever see.'

'Oh,' she breathed, because there were no words. Except two. 'Thank you. Thank you.'

Karangetti laughed as he put a soulful expression on his face, a clenched fist on his breast-bone, and mock piety into his voice, and he said:

'Ah, let us leave this paltry land,
And saile from hence to Greece, to lovely Greece,
I'll be thy Jason, thou my golden Fleece;
Where painted carpets o'er the meads are hurl'd
And Bacchus' vineyards o'er-spread the world:
Where Woods and Forrests goe in goodly greene,
I'll be Adonis, thou shalt be Loves Queene . . .
—Thou in those Groves, by Dis above,
Shalt live with me and be my love . . .'

He suddenly slumped forward, and the life peeled away from his face. 'Ana, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I always try to shield myself behind irony. Because I've been hurt many times, and long ago I knew all the three weapons that I can forge. They are only silence, and exile, and cunning. What else can I do?'

'Can I ever know you, really?'

Karangetti didn't know himself. One thing there was, though: simply history. The past is a key to the present; for instance, he reflected, his newly-found letter was a sincere testament to what he had once been, and besides, it might distract her, while . . .

'Ana, perhaps this—?' he said, opening up the waterproof leather pouch and extracting the folded-up metalpaper. 'No tricks, not now, not in this. Here I once managed to say some of *it*, the truth about myself. Read it if you will.'

Ana unfolded it like the wings of a butterfly. She hunched up and concentrated on deciphering the thrusting, loose and archaic handwriting.

'... What these experiences were I did not know, until lysergic acid diethylamide. I took it, and walked through our public gardens at midnight; privet hedges shadowily enclosed green, ferny plants with leaves in the shape of hearts; and when I looked, the leaves were like green, velvet glass, dimly luminous. Each leaf was webbed faintly, or rather veined, glazed over and perceptibly glowing. Sometimes the wind stumbled by, shaking out a frenetic, faery music; each blade seemed to jangle, a tinkling like that of ancient glass. Their greenness was of *soft jewels*.

'Much later, I read Huxley's "*Doors of Perception*", but even on that original, Blakeian trip, I realized things, and could for the first time call those previous moments of feeling-insight what they were: mystical experiences. The merest juvenilia of mysticism, of course, I am not Thomas à Kempis, nor a Traherne; certainly not a great soul. But once I was playing a record called '*Alchemy*' by the Third Ear Band. I left, returned, and opened a door on to the naturally darkened, sound-filled bedroom, where I met something alien.

'The strange music opened me to something. I saw visions. Of *other* places. Very different realities. And when I speak in my poems with symbols from my conceptual vocabulary—strangeness, piquant "*otherness*", is very, very important. But what frightened me came in one moment of thought; the vivid certainty that even the ugly-eriest visions can be entirely real and tangible. (Actually, I find a knowledge of the same frightening alienness in J. S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor: how strange, that that music was originally written to test organs!) A wilderness of cracked, sunparched mud, flooded with twisting ribbons of black shadow...? *Real?*

'Anyway, as the Man himself said, my words shift, change, and give way under the strain of meaning. You know, I think if I had the talent I would have liked to have been a conservatoire-schooled composer, not a self-educated acrobat juggling words, because—(Possibly, in a previous life-time, I may have orbited that mystery: pre-Renaissance music, their plainchants, the great clerical dances of France, the secular folk-songs that were sung, so says tradition, at Crecy, and to celebrate Agincourt, but, in principle, sacred music of all pre-16th century kinds, has such a profoundly nostalgic, elegaic effect upon me that I feel its communications are somehow deeply personal.)—just as Walter Pater wrote, "All art aspires toward the condition of music". To become the formless spiritual essences James Joyce believed in; that is to say, to become diffusely, maximally inspiring, and to achieve an aethereal purity and perfection of form. And I, Marguerite, agree.

'Storytelling almost always fails that acid test. And yet, re-reading Tolstoy, I am irresistably reminded that the greatest literary art almost always has a representational ambience: and I know that there is only one thing that we, as literary artists, must aspire to. To reveal the transcendent and unique, in the commonplaces of our lives.'

While Ana was engrossed in her reading, Karangetti slipped away, his thoughts already filmed with a pre-cognitive sadness.

The afternoon had faded past its bee-drowsy glory, and the sun was standing upon the western clouds as Karangetti glanced up while passing between the gleaming metal gates again; alone, he entered the rioting formality of the gardens. Thorns snagged at his brocaded, black vest and the matching silk loons, both garments especially styled for him by a tailor friend. Karangetti had his sitar slung on his back, as always, but his walk was slow and unwilling.

Finding the old gravel promenade, he followed it down to the greengrown stone bridge by the long-dry fountain, and where the lake gleamed through a trellis of trees, came upon a small grove. Birds, mostly woodpigeons and swallows, ex-

ploded about his path. He walked upon a cool and shaded, flower-dappled meadowland, which had a scarlet surf of strange poppies that emanated a dizzying scent.

Karangetti stopped, and turned to face three of the four gravestones there. And in his mind, shadows of memory fled.

—Karoly Loransics. Impressions of a tall, angular way of walking; always a stifled coldness about him. One of the masters of the star-beast itself; commanding its flight, using a runic code strange beyond quantum mechanics and the unified field theory.

And Mohanal Mistry, lying here—short and round-cornered, no sharp edges. He was one of the librarians guarding and tending *Eliot's* crystal memory. He was the only one of the three that Karangetti had known; he had been a friend. Karangetti painfully remembered listening one time at a tableful of growing beer glasses, to how a girl had gone away, taking the sun with her, and feeling too, something of the greyiness. He had known the woman. Strange . . .

Elias Ovshinsky. A face, in the dim farrago of the three thousand of the Crew. Karangetti remembered talking with him once, strolling beneath the stark forest of spires of a psi-fortress the Loct had been beaten back from, on the guarded shore of the Loctcontinent itself. Tall. Tall as Karangetti himself, even, but with an ursine bulkiness about him: dark as well, but instead of raven feathers, his hair was greying black wire. A beard, great and bushy, a matching bass voice. Rather grossly, theatrically extrovert. A caricature, perhaps; but then Karangetti had not really known him.

One thing, though: he was not a man who would deserve this, death, a pointless and eternal sleep in the dust.

Karangetti stood looking at the pitted headstones for some moments. Celtic crosses, the eye of Buddha on Mohanal's. Seeing their mannerisms of expression, idiosyncracies, gestures: people.

—Look, thanks, for trying. Thanks for coming to this place where I should have been. Thanks for it all, and goodbye . . .

He moved his head slightly, downwards.

What was it? The godawful poem, but two stanzas, yes,

the last and one of the middle ones . . . 'They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old, age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn, and in the morning and at the going down of the sun—' Something like that.

'For man also knoweth not his time,' Karangetti said aloud, 'as the fishes are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.

'So man lieth down and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep . . .'

He knew he could say no more. He raised a hand in farewell, let it drop.

The fourth stone stood a little apart, under a bank where the wild thyme blows, where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine . . . Karangetti had once spent many hours, making it so.

The ankh of Life, looped cross that was Resurrection and Eye also; it was carved upon a gravestone that, like the others, was greyed and pitted with time.

Marguerite Ferreira

2085-2112

Requiescat:

A spray of dog-roses climbed up the side of the worn stone and decorated the letters with white flowers. Violets grew on her grave, rosemary around it, planted by his own hands long ago. The language of flowers . . . Standing there, an old play came into his head, very famous, a tragedy.

We know what we are. But what may we be?

'Hi there . . .' he said, softly. But no answer came. A distant dearness on the hill, perhaps a secret sweetness in the stream. He found it hard to keep reality within its narrow bounds, and sometimes he guessed that after all this time his mind must be silted to the very edge of—But then, he thought, madness is a relative thing.

'It's been a while, Marguerite,' he said, 'my lady of the

island, since last I wandered this way . . . But, sometimes I have thought of you, and sometimes memories have come, I have wondered, and . . .' He looked at the violets at his feet. A wind moved in them.

He talked to her a long time. About many things, really. Of stale hopes, barren fears. About the way the world was going, was changing and would change. About the way he was going, was changing, had changed. The artist and his clay, and who could say which was which, anymore? He talked of the most ancient of days too, which she had known and shared with him, those times before whatever happened to *T. S. Eliot* and the engaging Loct starship had—happened . . .

And did she remember? Crazy days, the starship *Ezekiel*, and the worlds called Lindisfarne, Venus, and the Earth? Their walking together between the salt water and the sea-strand, beneath a silver moon called Rimbaud, an ivory moon called Baudelaire, and gazing up in wonder at the strange and jewel-heavy firmament. Visiting Leningrad, and the Ragnarok-scenery of Iceland. Bright moments, words, faces, gestures . . .

—And of course, she did.

After a meditative while, all his words went away and he sat down on the grass and loosely folded his legs as he brought round his sitar. He began to sing her an old song she had liked, a song written by a man called Harrison long before she had been born. An old ballad, slow and beautiful, almost sad.

'It's been a long, long . . . long time . . .'

As he sang, he plucked, so that his sitar's strings made gentle agreement.

'How could I ever have lost you—

When I . . . loved . . . you . . .'

His sitar threw bright shards of memory into the fading afternoon.

ANA WAS waiting at the entrance to the gardens. Somehow she had known . . . Probably, she had heard his singing: she should have thought of that.

'Remembrances . . .' she said, levelly.

Karangetti nodded. They overwhelmed him, sometimes.

Anatera studied him, her green eyes again incredibly soft, huge and luminous: like everything else about him, he realized, his tastes ran to extremes. She dropped her gaze, then.

'What was she like, Richard? I suppose she was . . . beautiful?'

The moon, he thought, walking in its brightness was not so fair.

He looked at her, sharply. 'Maybe. I loved her when this world was new, and like Beatrice, she was stolen from me. Isn't that—enough?'

No, Karangetti thought, not really any feelings of guilt, merely the flickering shadows of it. He continued, 'She was a daughter of the Sun, and the immortal bitch of this isle: now she's dead; but there's no rest for me, from my wanderings. Her name—let's just say it was Circe, or Calypso, or sometimes she was called Siduri . . .'

An expression ghosted across her face for a moment. It could perhaps, he considered, have been called a frown. So he softened.

'She was tall, but not so tall as that, and slim, like a willow. She liked satins and furs, and bright colours. Vivacious, and of course she laughed a lot. She was tricky at times. I remember winter evenings, sitting in front of the fire, watching the snow fall past the windows, sharing a bottle of Moselle, when I would talk, you see, for hours that were punctuated when she began her laughing . . .' He shook his head, slung his sitar like a guitar, and broke off some more bars of strummed memories. Then he raised his head,

looked at Ana, not seeing her. 'Her hair was long and fair—like yours, Milady, Milady like yours.'

He laughed a harsh metallic laugh, that went wrong somewhere in his throat.

After a moment, Anatera said, 'And those other graves?'

'Old acquaintances, from the crew of *T. S. Eliot*. Immortals gone to their narrow beds. Oh yes, did you think *I* was the only one? It was a gift given to us all at Home, the life everlasting. Three thousand of us came to this world; but the landing, the years of constant struggle with the land-octopus and a strange Nature, happenchance, too many strange gods . . .' He paused, not looking at her, but into the sunset.

'As to what happened here, I will tell you.' There, on the hill-top, with the wind freshening and the sun sinking, dying and bathing the sky with its blood, Karangetti swept horizons with his grandiose hands.

'There, to the north, lies Mancontinent. There, far over in the south and east, is where the Loct came down . . .

'It was a day in October, iron-skied, lightly raining. I was called away from our few weather eyes and installations and such on this place, to Beachead, which was then still a base rather than a city. Marguerite was alone in our house. It had happened before but she told me she didn't mind . . . Anyway—the Loct had been quiet for a year or two, but they chose that day to make an exploratory raid.

'We're well along the southern coast of the Manlands, not too far from its coastline. The Loctcontinent is *long* distant. And this is a very small, very lonely island. Besides, considering the weapons we used then not so long after the two ships were thrown here, there were no strategic, tactical or logistical or any real advantages to be gained by taking this place; it would inevitably fall to Man in short order. I have often thought about *why*, but—' he shook his head.

'She broadcast a cry for help. Mohanal and Karoly and Elias Ovshinsky were out in a stratospheric craft from the ship patrolling our southern skies for us. They came at once. I flew from Beachead, and heavy-weapons' craft followed with all speed. And when I overdrove my dart-craft getting

here, I quartered the island, and saw wreckage, signs of a passing battle, Loct, ruins of castles, all on fire.

'And of course,' he said, gently, 'because of all our subterranean installations, our commandant could only decide to sterilize totally this beauteous, magical isle. So, our dirigibles went over, and sowed white phosphorus and phosgene behind them.

'And a day or so later, I volunteered to check out the island. I suppose I was more than crazy: I remember that there was a drink called vodka, once, and now it isn't, anymore . . . After a while, I set the robotic machines to healing and tending, and I went away again, back to the mainland.

'Just then, the Loct made their Fifth Invasion, and I got an arm frozen off—' he held up his left hand, '—though, because of my RNA-surgery, I grew back the limb again. She was dead, and I was gone away from this place; in the deepest, darkest hours of night, when insomnia has me in its grip again, I often think of this island and what happened, here. And that's how it all was, more or less. All very—pointless, supid, random. A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing . . .'

The sun had swollen, into a big, bright red ember floating on the glowing horizon. It was making his eyes tic, staring at it for such a long time. Fair, far Fensalir in her high orbit and delicate-featured Galadriel were noticeable ghosts in the sky.

Ana wove about her the silence of sympathy, according to the script she read inside Karangetti's head.

'There was a poem—' he remembered. 'Part of it says: "What though the radiance which was once so bright, Be now forever taken from my sight, Though nothing can bring back the hour Of splendour in the grass, Of glory in the flower, We will grieve not, rather find Strength in what remains behind . . ." And that just about says all that I, too, would like to believe . . .'

he trailed off sadly, then shrugged.

And Ana, after a time, asked, ' . . . A beautiful poem, Richard. When did you write it?'—Which suddenly struck her as incongruous.

She saw him turn and frown at her, his brows creased.

'As long as I live,' he said across the gulf of human misunderstanding, 'I'll never know why you said that.'

After a moment, he folded away his frown, and began humming an old tune by a man called Harrison. And Ra took at last to his boat of the night; and they looked up at the bright benign sky, and lost themselves among the dimly glittering stars.

THE END

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